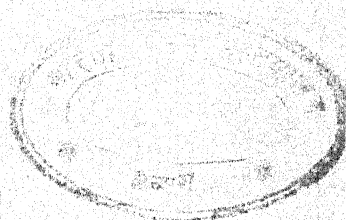


TOWN MICE



By the same Author

FULL BOARD

PIN DUST

LADIES IN THE SUN

6501

TOWN MICE

By

MARGERY MAITLAND DAVIDSON

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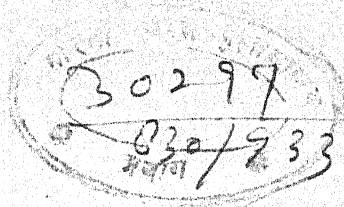
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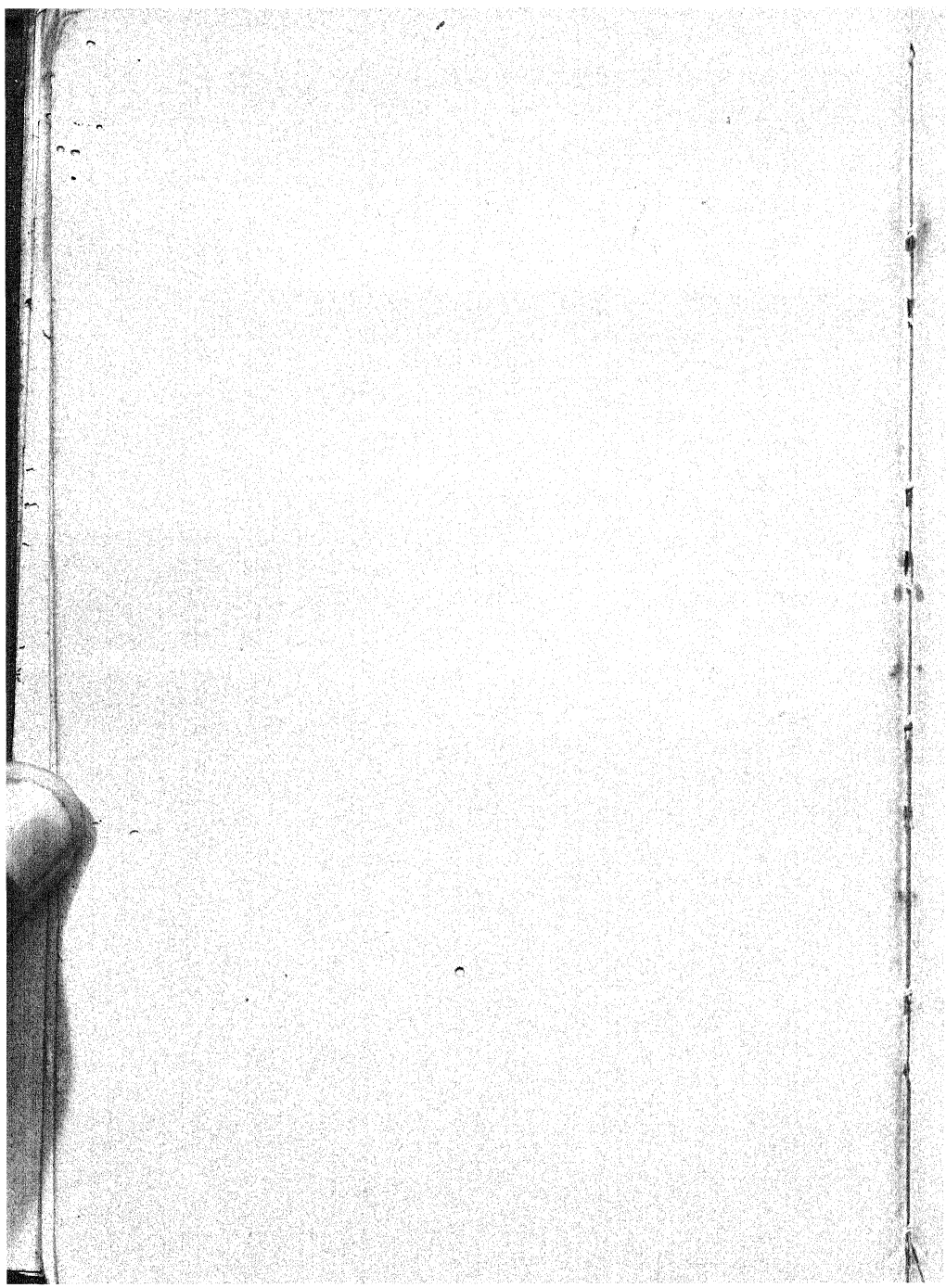
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DEDICATED TO
DAVID



Memorandum
15-36

I

THE day the letter came differed in no way from any other day. Cicely poured out the coffee and thought she would do the flowers. Perhaps some pink stocks; they smelled so nice and looked lovely in the silver bowl. Jim scanned the paper sharply as he crunched his toast.

She said: "Busy to-day?"

He looked up at her through his horn-rimmed spectacles, and his lean, yellowish face wrinkled itself in the smile which always appeared when he talked to her.

"Rather. A lot of throat swabs coming in. Old Simpson's got the wind up. Must get to the lab. soon to-day. I promised to put him out of his misery quickly."

"Old fuss-pot," said Cicely. "He always thinks every sore throat will turn out to be diphtheria." She added: "It's going to be a lovely day."

She glanced at the wistaria, which later would push its frail mauve budding fingers round the window-sill, then through the window to the village street. Old Cottee, the roadman, was going by, his corduroy trousers tied below the knee, his cracked voice persuading the mare that her load of gravel wasn't really heavy. Bees droned in the wallflower bed, in that velvety oasis between the front of the house and the road.

"I suppose," she ventured, "you couldn't get back early? We might play tennis."

"No." His pleasant voice was firm. "I can't, old girl. Lot of routine work. The hospital's full. Old Scott wants a consultation this afternoon and then I must go out to Whearsden this evening. Sorry. There'll probably be a post-mortem to do, too."

"It's all right." Cicely's voice was regretful, for she was not very good at disguising her feelings. People ought not to be ill in the spring and summer. Anyway, they never seemed to think a doctor needed any rest or that his young wife liked to see something of her husband—it was different if you were old.

"Well, I must get on." His long body extricated itself from the chair. He came over to her, and she felt his lips on the back of her neck. Sensing her disappointment, he patted her shoulder: "See you to-night. Have a good day, Snooks. Ring me up some time."

"Yes."

In a few seconds she heard his car hooting itself out of the gate. With a faint sigh she rose and looked at herself in the big mirror over the mantelshelf. Automatically she smoothed her honey-coloured short hair into place. She then pulled her self-knitted dark blue jumper down. Yes, it did look rather neat, much better than Anne's.

Dorothy came in clumsily to clear the breakfast things, and with her Amber.

Amber lolloped round the room, showing by varied tail-waggings and arch glancings at the door what her desires were.

"In a minute," said Cicely reasonably. "Shan't be long." She was watching Dorothy piling knives and forks all hugger-mugger together. And she had been told so often.

"Dorothy," she began, and then stopped. What was the good? You couldn't train these country girls, not properly. All the training you gave them was undone as soon as they went home to their mothers' cottages. They just fell back into their childhood's ways.

Oblivious to any wrongdoing, Dorothy said pleasantly: "Will you be going otter-hunting to-day, m'm? Do you want your thick boots? The meet's down in them meadows by Larche's brook."

"No, not to-day. I might just go to the meet, that's all."

You couldn't be cross with Dorothy.

"Will the master be in to dinner, to-night? It's a shame he got it all cold last night, when cook took such pains to keep it hot, but after ten o'clock we didn't think it was likely he'd want it."

"I don't know, I'll tell you later."

"They say there's a deal of sickness about," Dorothy added with relish, "but it's a miracle the master don't catch something, messing about with all those germs and things."

"Yes," Cicely said mechanically. Cook and Dorothy were always pessimistic about Jim: and the dangers he ran in his capacity of bacteriologist and pathologist, a function which they found it hard to understand. There was an underlying reproach in these attacks, as if she, as his wife, were to blame for allowing him to "meddle with such things."

Dorothy banged and rattled her passage through the door and down to the kitchen, leaving Cicely irresolutely staring out of the window, an unaccustomed dissatisfaction gnawing at her vaguely. There was a lot to do; it wasn't that. The point was—was it all worth while?

The ordering of meals, feeding the chickens, doing the flowers, going to the meet, tea with mother, Anne and Colin in the garden, perhaps some bridge afterwards, calling to see Mrs. Beech on her way home to look at her new rhododendron bushes. Of course, if one had more money and could afford to hunt and go up to London often and give parties—if only Jim had more free time—if only . . .

Amber interrupted her train of thought with her insistent soft nose. It poked itself into the palm of her hand and snuffled her ankles. She wished to be brushed and taken out. Better do it now. Cicely went out into the hall and took out the brush from the big oak chest, Amber, her golden retriever vanity all agog, closely observing her actions. The grooming done, her coat burnished to silver gilt, she led the way to the garden, which lay at the back of the house, Cicely following with scissors. The garden was good this year. Late tulips held their proud cups to the sun and stood sentinel over the misty forget-me-not bed. Bronze and gold wallflowers glowed against the green background of shrubs. In the distance vivid pink chestnuts and rose-coloured may spiked the sky. The stocks were on the other side of the tennis court, and Cicely turning over in her mind the problem of what to order for dinner—something that Jim liked—made her way to the spot. If this weather had come to stay, she must do something about summer clothes. She would discuss it with Anne. Perhaps they could arrange to go together to London on an excursion-day. She wouldn't buy a lot. One or two good things only. She couldn't bear decorative cheapness. Soon there would be strawberries and roses and one or two garden-parties—the horse show at

Klingley, the village flower show, sports. One floral frock would do for them all.

The stocks gathered, chickens fed, dinner ordered, she went up to her roomy bedroom to change. Here she always felt peaceful. Jim's mother had had good taste and had refrained from over-furnishing the old Queen Anne house. A carpet, faded but good, in the middle of the sloping floor. The walnut dressing-table, bed and wardrobe were all completely satisfactory, and the egg-green silk curtains and bedclothes, Cicely's choice, picked up the vague predominant colour in the carpet and gave one a sense of harmony. Yes, a nice room. As she slipped on a linen dress she considered with satisfaction that she had grown thinner since last year. Not that she was ever fat, but when you were rather above the average height with long legs, it was better to be very slim. Not much powder, fair tanned skin didn't need it. Just a touch of coral lipstick and she was ready.

Amber scrambled into the baby Austin and sat on her haunches, staring straight at the road as they drove through the main village street of Weston. The shopkeepers, as they caught sight of Cicely, touched their foreheads. She was very popular with them—after all, they had known her since she was a child. She was part of the village life. The tiny car rushed by meadows brimming with buttercups, through lanes, their hedges sprinkled white with flowering hawthorn, past woods deep with bluebells, none of which Cicely noticed. Her eyes fixed on the road, she drove fast in an endeavour to throw off her mood of irritation. After all, spring followed spring. They were all exactly alike, and next year it would be the same. So why go into raptures,

like her mother, over a perfectly natural and consecutive phenomenon? She had seen twenty-eight of them. Six, of course, she had spent at school, and all the rest here. Pretty dull on the whole. It would be fun to have their two weeks' holiday in London this year instead of taking a seaside cottage, but Jim wouldn't like that. He adored the sea, and after all he needed fresh air after being shut up in the laboratory practically all his life.

Suddenly she swerved the car into a side road and stopped by a wicket gate linking two high, neatly cut hedges. With Amber at her side she walked up the path leading to Brook Cottage, which Cicely considered was all that a large country cottage should be. Genuinely Elizabethan, it squatted calmly in the middle of a garden riotously lovely with flowers, every one of its windows open wide to the sun. On one side stretched an orchard of fruit trees now smothered in frothing pink and cream blossom; on the other, a well-watered lawn divided into a rose garden. She appreciated the fact that spring cleaning had been accomplished, for all the spotted muslin curtains peeped cleanly crisp from the windows, and the hall disclosed by the open door twinkled with polished oak and brass.

"Anybody coming to the meet?" she called, her clear voice ringing through the house.

"Idiot—it's to-morrow."

"Lord, isn't that just typical of Dorothy? She said it was to-day. Where are you, Anne?"

"Here."

Cicely decided the voice came from the old schoolroom at the back of the house. She found Anne absorbed in

a struggle to capture the beauties of a scarcely open tulip with brush and water colours.

"Rotten," she said to Cicely who looked over her shoulder. "It's no good without lessons, and you must go to a decent art school or it's no good at all."

Anne's newly awakened passion for art reminded Cicely of Ernest.

"Seen Ernest lately?" she asked, and watched the flood of colour rise in Anne's face. She thought: Anne is lovely these days. Her eyes are such a clear brown, her lips are softer and pinker than they were, and her hair is like cloudy chestnut. She looks as if she were either going to laugh or cry all the time—she's lost some of her secretiveness.

"Yes, I met him yesterday by the bridge. He'd been for a tramp. He's got an awful lot of work to do. *The Pioneer* has asked him to do a weekly caricature."

"That's good," said Cicely and paused, wondering how to express all she wanted to say.

At last she asked bluntly: "Still keen?"

Anne looked straight up at her. "Yes, I am," she said firmly. "And I always shall be. But it's no good." Her lips trembled.

"Some women are swine," said Cicely.

"She won't divorce him—so that's that," Anne said, biting the end of her paint brush.

"Perhaps it's just as well, dear. You're too young yet. Marriage isn't roses all the way."

Anne gazed thoughtfully at an aged, cracked globe of the world.

"That depends—on how much you care and how much you're capable of caring, it seems to me. Ernest

and I . . . we'd be different from you and Jim—don't you see ? ”

Cicely mentally conjured up the physical Ernest. Tall, slim and athletic : eyes brown and alive, thin face, fine dark hair, a sardonic expression, charming voice, but decisive in tone. His hobbies were sailing and ski-ing. With his nervous-looking hands he executed fine drawings always with a touch of malicious humour in them. They were famous. Decidedly a romantic figure, an attractive mixture. But he might be cruel—very cruel if he became bored.

“ Yes, I do see, but Anne—it's better for two people to be ordinary and prosaic, than always having to try to keep up with each other. It must be such an effort for a woman to be obliged to struggle to hold her husband, to be attractive all the time.”

Anne, with the experience of twenty years behind her, smiled. She was certain that during that period she had observed and gained more knowledge than dear old Cicely, who somehow had lived much less and gone through the experience of five years of married life with eyes completely shut and emotions untouched. Funny. Still, perhaps she was made like that. Perhaps she never would discover the real mystery of love and the thrill of living. Cicely had everything so exactly taped—or thought she had, dear old stupid. But she was inquisitive, she wanted to poke a tentative finger into the whirlpool of her sister's feelings. She asked now with unblushing frankness :

“ Do you think Ernest really loves you ? Or is it just—just physical ? It might be, you know, Anne. Don't deceive yourself.”

Anne's clear eyes clouded angrily.

"What was it with Jim, do you suppose, before you married him? For goodness' sake don't begin to preach, Cicely, just because you're married and settled down. You take all the fun and colour out of things when you talk like that."

Cicely was not listening very hard. She was used to Anne's rebellious moods, but one word caught her attention and stuck in her mind. Settled down—there was a dreary finality about the words. They stung somehow, and because she felt the jabs, she struck back at Anne.

"Well, you must give up seeing him. It can't lead you anywhere. It . . . he is dangerous. I know mother's worried about you. You ought to go away—or he should. Too much temptation, he should know that."

"How can he go away? He's bought the house and everything. And I can't either. It isn't possible to move without money, and Colin wants mother to invest some more in his beastly chickens, although he hates them like poison, and if she does we shan't be able to go to the sea this year."

Cicely carefully followed the intricacies of Anne's explanation.

"Where's mother now?"

"With Colin, looking at the hen houses. You'd better go and find them and be firm with mother. She'll only be throwing good money after bad. It's not Colin's fault he can't make the thing pay. Poor lamb, he tries hard enough."

"I know. Jim says his heart's not in it, but he says it's the finest thing for him—the fresh air and open life. But I suppose Switzerland would do him more good still."

"Yes," Anne said soberly, "I expect it would."

Their eyes met. Unspoken fear drew them together again. Cicely pulled Anne's arm.

"Come on," she said. "Let's both go and give our advice. Anyway, I must whistle Amber. Baby chickens have a fatal fascination for her."

Together they went out into the sunshine. They found Mrs. Simpson staring with absorption through wire-netting at a crowd of White Wyandottes. Her black and white dress fluttered in the gentle breeze, and the curly greying hair framing her pink and white face fluttered too. Colin, hands in breeches pockets, was talking half-heartedly to his mother; but while his lips moved, his eyes, restless as always, scanned the blue sky and the fluffy white clouds in it. He was mentally making calculations as to the height of them. Flying conditions would be good to-day. With an effort he brought his mind, which persisted in winging its uncontrolled way through the clear crystal atmosphere accompanied by the glorious imaginary sound of thrumming engines, to the question of hot-pot for the Wyandottes. Patiently, for the third time, he went over their menu, explaining the cost of each item from potato peelings to corn, and the effect it had on them, and then on to the cost of coops. But Mrs. Simpson was unusually exact this morning, almost ruthless. In her zeal to arrive at true facts she forgot to soften her seeming harshness with the half apologetic smile she reserved especially for her son. Not that he very much minded. He knew she was worried about Anne. He knew, although she had not confided in him, that she wanted Anne to go away, and that if the money was put into hen coops, Anne's love affair might reach gigantic proportions and swamp them

all. There was no accounting for Anne; you never knew what she really thought or what she would do next. Silly, it seemed—love versus hen coops. On the whole, he was on the side of the hen coops. They were something tangible and also necessary for their daily bread and for the comfort of the hens. What hen could be expected to lay when she was suffering from rheumatism, and leaky roofs caused that. He asked her :

“Could you lay an egg if you were constantly racked by rheumatism?”

It did not even raise a smile. Mrs. Simpson said : “My dear boy, the whole question of egg production depends on what a chicken has to eat, not on what it feels. It lays an egg because it can’t help it.”

He murmured, “Happy chickens—the right atmosphere, lots of eggs. We might even give them a gramophone and watch the results. After all, it’s a pretty dull business to spend all your energy on silently laying an egg only to have it taken from you. Well, on the whole, it’s a good thing they are not cursed with a sense of humour—no, darling, not you—the chickens, I said.”

He hailed his sisters with relief. Mrs. Simpson said to Cicely : “Hullo, darling, how is Jim?” She was very fond of her son-in-law, and found it pleasant to mother him with the rest of her family.

“He’s all right. Looking a bit yellow, perhaps.”

“It’s the atmosphere he works in. Full of the gas from those burners and no air. Much more healthy to be an ordinary doctor and go round in a car.”

“You’ve said that before, mummy darling,” pointed out Anne, “but it’s not half so interesting. Jimmy adores his bugs and incubators, doesn’t he, Cicely?”

"Yes, I s'pose he does. And he's talking of starting some private research of his own—turning the maids' bathroom into a small lab. Horrible idea, I think."

Colin darted a swift glance at Cicely's calm face. "Don't try to stop him, Cicely," he said. "Be wise."

"But the maids may leave. Besides, it's so stuffy, having germs growing in the house and the maids using our bath."

"You've got such a sanitary mind, much too sanitary for a doctor's wife."

"Shut up, Colin, you don't understand."

Mrs. Simpson put in: "He'll only spend more time at the hospital, Cicely. Better let him do as he likes. He'll be working more at home then. Are you staying to lunch?"

"Yes, please."

Mrs. Simpson, having settled the question and closed the subject, led the way back to the house. All her children adored her. They had always accepted the fact that she was not a particularly intellectual woman, but she was a shrewd observer, had a good business head, and above all was a born home maker and life giver. She could persuade the weakest plant to thrive. Tiny, ailing chickens and ducks recovered miraculously under her care, and Cicely never forgot a small incident which occurred when she was a child. It stuck in her memory and set the seal of utter devotion on her already strong affection for her mother. In the second year of the War, Nigel, her eldest brother, came home from the front to die. Cicely had been playing happily in the garden one evening when she saw her mother coming out of the door, a packet of seeds in her hand.

"Where are you going, mummy? May I come too?"

Her mother said gently, with a queer distraught vagueness : "Listen, darling. Nigel has just gone to sleep for always. I'm going out to plant these seeds—you see, darling, I feel I want to make something live."

Cicely had not seen then, but she understood later.

The question of putting more money into the chicken farm was raised again as they lunched in the long, low dining-room. During the discussion, Anne stayed silent. She was the youngest, anyway, she told herself, and she had no wish to interfere in these schemes which her family thought would concern her so nearly. It didn't really matter a scrap if she went away or not—she would go on caring for Ernest just the same, always, for ever ; but they, bless them, would never understand how she felt about it. So she listened to their low, nicely modulated voices while she stared at the yellow azaleas on the table and thought of Ernest and the mess she had made of her water-colour this morning, and that Cicely seemed out of tune with things to-day and wondered why. It was a nuisance that she and Ernest couldn't see each other often, but people in the village were already beginning to gossip and to stare at her rather curiously. The frank friendliness they had always meted out to her was tinged with just a little reticence, and she hated it. All her life she had been conscious of their tremendous respect and liking for her family. It counted enormously. Silly, of course, but it did. The whole thing was complicated by her mother's distrust of Ernest. He came to dinner occasionally and they went to his house, but she seldom had an opportunity to talk alone with him. They had taken long walks together when he first came to the neighbourhood, but after their friendliness had merged into something

closer it had seemed unwise. Now Cicely, with her veiled suggestions! He, the darling, was anxious, too, to avoid gossip. Not that he minded for himself. He was a newcomer to the village and an artist; therefore, although the villagers liked him, there was naturally a mutual holding back. But he minded for her. Sometimes she longed just for the sight of him and wandered down the lanes, hoping to meet him on his rambles. She never confessed, if they did meet, that it was anything but accidental. But it was on these occasions that they talked about themselves. Each leaning on a walking-stick in the middle of a road, surrounded by the dogs, they looked at each other. He told her how he worshipped every inch of her loveliness, that she was always in his thoughts and that she was the one being in the world he wanted. Precious, glorious moments. Then, yesterday, by the bridge, he told her his wife wouldn't divorce him. He had asked her again. Dismal, hopeless.

Colin showed by various little actions that he was sympathetic. Dear old Colin, he had his own troubles. Awful to have to work at one thing while your heart was in another. But, of course, they would never take him in the Air Force with a delicate chest.

After luncheon, Cicely found herself walking round the garden with her mother. The sun poured down on the flower-filled borders, extracting every fraction of scent from their willing beauty. Cicely linked her arm in her mother's strong one, soothed for the first time that day.

"The garden's nice, dear," she said.

"Not so bad, and I've got lots of things in the nursery bed to plant out. I'm thinking of giving my little party in the garden earlier this year. The Balford boy will be

home from India in July and he always likes my garden-parties, he says, so I think I'll have it about that time."

"Anne has heard from him, then?"

"Yes." Mrs. Simpson sighed. "She wasn't very interested." Suddenly she asked, almost pleadingly: "You don't think she'll do anything foolish, do you, Cicely? She talks to you more than me."

Cicely laughed uneasily. "She doesn't tell me much. I think she feels there's a big margin between married and unmarried women, and I s'pose there is if you come to think of it. You can't tell, of course. Ernest Faulkner is an attractive creature, but if I were you I should trust to Anne's streak of conventionality. She minds awfully what people say."

"Do you think so?" Mrs. Simpson's tone was doubtful. "Young things in love are apt to be rash, and Anne has all sorts of hidden depths. She hasn't really been tested yet. She's such a pretty thing," she added.

They moved on in silence until Mrs. Simpson broke it abruptly.

"Cicely, you ought to have a baby."

"What makes you suddenly bring that up again?"

"Because you're restless, my dear. It's so foolish to say you must wait till you've got a thousand a year—very foolish. And you've been married five years."

She watched her daughter flush under her tanned skin and her well-shaped lips harden. There was a queer obstinacy in her elder daughter which at times she found extremely exasperating. It was more an obstinacy of feeling than of ideas. She guessed that Cicely was at a loss to explain coherently the antipathy she had to this vastly important question. Jim, so easy-going, had told

his mother-in-law that there was heaps of time and Cicely must do as she liked. It was for her to decide. And Cicely, as an excuse, stuck to her point that it was not fair to have a child unless they could provide for it properly.

Cicely screwed up her round blue eyes now and considered. "It's all such a messy business," she complained.

Was that at last the real reason, wondered her mother. It might well be. Cicely was tidy and fastidious to the point of being pernicketty. Anne often called her old-maidish.

"Besides," she went on, "we haven't got enough money yet. Don't you worry, mother, soon you'll have dozens of grandchildren rolling into your lap."

"I hope not." Mrs. Simpson was fervent in her reply. "Two will be plenty. But I'm convinced you'd feel more settled if you had a baby to look after."

Cicely thereupon made a grimace, emphasizing the dimples on either side of her mouth, and then suddenly as they reached the old summer house and sat down in the cool stuffiness of old wood, she gave way to a few moments of self-revelation.

"I'm not restless in that way, mother. Only life seems so dull here. After all, I've never really had a good time. The same people here day after day, doing the same things, talking about the same things, even looking the same. Life just drifts by. I'm not even very necessary to Jim—he buries himself in his work and just pops up out of the depths sometimes to say, 'Hullo.' You were so frightfully determined that I should be brought up on good music at school, but I don't hear

a sound here. I want to live to see things and do things before I'm too old. A baby won't help me now."

"Things, Cicely? You talk a great deal about things. What about people? You've got Anne, and Colin and me always standing by you."

"Oh, yes, I know." Impatiently Cicely waved them aside. "I don't mean I want to give up all this for always, but I . . . I want a change."

"My dear, it's a bad thing to resent circumstances which you can't alter. The only way is to submit and make the best of them."

"People in the country are like that. They just drift. Why should we all lie down and not fight for what we want? I'm sure Jim could get a job in London if he tried. Everybody here thinks an awful lot of him."

Mrs. Simpson carefully removed greenfly from a rambler leaf before she asked: "How long have you been feeling like this, dear?"

"I don't know—how can I tell?" The words "married" and "settled down" still rang through her head—an accusation, almost.

"But think," she went on, "what people in London are doing. Things people are thinking, creating, accomplishing. Here we only get the echoes of them in the newspapers. Then there's Ascot, soon Wimbledon, theatres, horse shows, concerts: and we sit here and talk about—about hen coops."

"But they always have. That's not a new discovery. All those events happen as surely as flowers in season bloom here," Mrs. Simpson said gently.

Cicely kicked a stone with her neat toe. "Well, it's no use talking, I s'pose. Only I'm bored stiff to-day, that's all."

"That word didn't exist in my young days," said Mrs. Simpson platitudinously.

"But it does now," Cicely pointed out rather rudely.

"Yes." Her mother's voice was quiet. "And I hear it's used quite a lot in London, too."

Then without warning Cicely recovered herself.

"Well, I must go and telephone to Jim. He asked me to."

Amber, having enjoyed an entrancing prolonged sniff in the vegetable garden, rejoined her mistress; and Mrs. Simpson, watching her tall, gracefully moving elder daughter, thought anxiously that after all her nature, though so entirely different from Anne's, was probably more complex on the whole. Her brain, which had shown itself at school to be above the average, had been dormant since her marriage, and perhaps more danger lay in the reawakening of it than in Anne's awakening of heart. Daughters were difficult but dear creatures.

In a few seconds Cicely reappeared and announced that she was going to the hospital to look in on Jim. She had completely regained her self-possession and bundled herself and Amber into the car with characteristic promptness. Just a wave of the hand and she slid out of her mother's sight round the bend of the road. Now she drove really fast. The country town of Redlow was fifteen miles away, and Jim had said: "Come as soon as you can, old girl, as I've got to go out." She had to slow down as the country road dwindled into narrow tram-lined streets, and shopping pedestrians wandered in a desultory fashion across the roads. These country-town people were so slow of movement; or was it because they felt the town belonged to them and that

people in cars were just interlopers to be ignored? The county hospital lay on the outskirts of the town on the other side. Persistently, Cicely hooted her way through a jumble of traffic, here and there catching sight of an acquaintance on the pavement and nodding in a friendly fashion. Her eyes took in the shop windows, displaying queer, oddly un-smart clothes. London designers seemed to have an insulting conception of provincial taste, she thought. Nothing but bits and pieces and scrappily-built sports suits and a strange array of high-crowned hats, enveloping and sturdy. Clear at last of the hampering tram lines, she opened out and allowed the car to race down a wide road. Amber, nostrils quivering, body alert, was on guard beside her. She turned into the County Hospital gates, just avoiding the ambulance which was emerging, and stopped at the foot of wide stone steps leading up to the front door.

The hall porter, a smiling ex-soldier, came running down to tell her that Dr. Ferguson was in the laboratory. Cicely got out of the car and made her way round the hospital buildings to a low-lying block on the south side. Her whole being revolted against the laboratory, its contents, its dangers, its close acrid smell, and the hold it had over Jim. From a distance, she viewed it philosophically. It was the means by which they lived. But it was when she was obliged to view it at close quarters that she shuddered. Pausing in the doorway, her eyes sought Jim. There he was in his white coat, bending over the microscope against the background of white tiles. The light, in itself cold and frigid as if reflected from snow, showed up every detail of the apparatus. Regiments of test-tubes stoppered with gaily coloured cotton wools, the basins, let in the benches,

spattered with vivid iridescent purple, orange, blue. Bunsen burners, blue-flamed, hissed warningly, and incubators, crystal clear flasks, water baths, oil sterilisers—all the paraphernalia which went with this germ-growing business—surrounded Jim. His fair head showed finely in profile as it held itself absorbed. One hand played with the lens control, the other dotted down figures.

Suddenly he looked up and saw her.

"Sorry." He smiled his warm smile. "Just finishing a blood count—rather important—shan't be a moment."

She sat sideways on a high stool watching him at work. This cold place with its unyielding atmosphere constituted Jim's real life. The conscious hours he spent at home—perhaps three before bed-time and one and a half in the morning—were just an introduction or epilogue to his day. Extraordinary, when you came to think of it, that he could throw himself at all into her life and doings when he did come home. But then men were made like that. They could turn a mental switch and direct their thoughts when and how they wished. Different from women, whose mentalities, on the whole, were so completely disorganized, a confused mass of indirect activity. Perhaps it was because their problems were so petty, diverse and tiresome.

Outside the sunlight splashed on to leaves of beeches quivering in the breeze in movement of life. Inside all was still except for the bunsen-burner flames and Jim's fingers. Quiet as death—yes, and most of those test-tubes held death-dealing bacteria. She said:

"Jim dear, you're like a magician in his lair."

He jotted down a last figure and threw his pencil with a clatter on the bench. "I wish I were a wizard or

something." He raised his thin face and looked at her. "God, I wish I was. I lost a case of meningitis this afternoon—thought she was getting on."

"She? How old?"

"Eighteen. Nice child."

A silence. Then: "Have you had tea, and how is your mother?" he asked.

Again that sense of irritation. She knew his thoughts were full of the case, she knew he would have liked to talk about it: but it was always the same, he talked down to her, turned off the natural current of his thoughts in a clumsy effort to penetrate hers. But at the same time, she knew she really did not want to hear about death, disease and the part he had taken in it—no, not on a lovely sunny afternoon like this. She wanted him to join in, to cast off care and illness for once.

"No, I didn't wait for tea. Mother's all right. A bit worried about the problem of hencoops, and if she should buy some more—and about Anne."

"Anne—what about Anne?"

"Oh, nothing."

Of course he wouldn't understand about Anne. That was the funny part about Jim. Although he was not very old—just forty—all the pulsating passion of life seemed to pass him by. Serious-minded, engrossed in his work—yes, all that—but then, so were lots of other men. Yet they had time, too, to enter into that other world of emotion, to notice a pretty woman, to indulge in sentiment. He was devoted to her, but was that just because she happened to be his wife? Probably.

"Jim," she burst out, "couldn't you get a job away from here? A change would do us both good. Aren't

you tired of always working in this same old lab. with the same old people?"

He went over to the incubator and shoved a test-tube in a wire basket into its dark interior. He snapped the door to, and then put his hands into his coat pockets and regarded her thoughtfully through his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Here it's a certainty—there——" he indicated the outside world, "no, it's too risky. Without something behind you, something to fall back on. I'd like it all right—more scope, knocking up against better men than yourself—but, no, Snooks, I've got you to think of. You and bread-and-butter—safe. I know it sounds mundane and dull—but there you are. We must make the best of things."

That was what her mother had said, and it was this idea of compromise which was so irritating, middle-aged, dreadful even. Compromise—it was like a padded cell. No matter how much you wriggled and squirmed or knocked yourself against its cloaking softness, you were a prisoner.

Jim was now hastily scribbling his name on a heap of reports, the lab. boy waiting at his elbow. In profile, his face was lean and sharp, the mouth determined, but the whole set of the head and his shoulders spoke of indecision. There was nothing dogged or ruthless about his attitude as he sat there. When he looked up at her with short-sighted blue-grey eyes, in themselves conveying an expression of frustration, she pulled herself together and smiled.

"Well—what now?"

"Must go to Whearsden and then—well, there'll be a P.M. on the child. About seven o'clock, I expect."

"I see. I'd better go home."

"Sorry, Snooks."

"It's all right."

Listlessly she gathered up her bag and gloves and turned to the sunlit door.

"See you some time, then. We'll keep your dinner hot."

"Don't bother, I'd rather have something cold," he assured her in a worried fashion and with the next breath was giving instructions about the rubber gloves for the post mortem.

Cicely drove home quickly—too quickly for safety. On the hall table was the letter with a typewritten address. She opened it carelessly.

It came from a firm of solicitors in London, and it informed her that her godfather had left her approximately five hundred thousand pounds for her sole use.

II

ANNE stepped through the casement window. "I had to come," she said.

Ernest Faulkner had been prowling round his drawing-room considering its symmetry, colouring and general demeanour, and pronouncing it perfect. His hands stayed in his pockets as he said :

"Come in, beautiful, why not ?"

"Mrs. Clements saw me through the kitchen window."

"I hoped the sight gladdened her rheumy old eyes."

"You know what I mean. It'll be all over the village this evening. Still, I had to come."

"You said that before, my sweet little Anne," he pointed out. "Why not sit down, yes, in that grandmother chair—it makes a good background for your dress—and wipe that puzzled look from your darling eyes and then spit out the trouble."

"It's good news—at least, I suppose it is," she added doubtfully. "Ernest, you do love me, don't you ?"

"Even to the ground you tread on," he answered promptly. "Don't you believe it ?"

"Then why, why don't you kiss me ?"

"Because I don't want to."

He stood looking at her, his monkey-like eyes glittering, his lips tucked in at the corners and his dark head shining in the light. Although he was still, she felt that all his being was quivering with movement. Her mother said he was "full of nerves—highly-strung."

But he was amazingly vital and handsome, she thought, and tantalizing. He simply forced you from apathy, you felt your best when he was in the room, you made stupendous efforts. Even Cicely did—she had noticed it.

She plunged.

"Please, Ernest," she said in a low voice. "Let's go away together."

Without stirring, he said: "Certainly not."

"Why not?" She looked rebellious.

"I don't seduce children. Besides . . ."

"Yes?"

"I happen to like you too much."

"Oh!"

"You don't understand that, do you, Anne?"

"No. Not quite. You see," she averted her eyes now, "as we can't marry I thought it might be a good idea. Lots of people do."

There was a silence, during which Ernest turned away from the extremely desirable vision of Anne in a deep pink dress sitting in his chintz-covered grandmother chair, and looked out into the brilliant garden. She sat still, intensely aware of him, staring straight in front of her. She wondered if he guessed how much she loved him, how she had struggled with all sorts of scruples and inborn reticences and repressions before she had decided on this course.

He came back to his position in front of her.

"Please, Ernest," she said childishly.

"No, no, a thousand times no," he said crossly.

"Now tell me what's happened."

"Cicely, it's Cicely. Her godfather—we'd forgotten all about him—he's left her a lot of money. She wants

to go to London to live there, and I am to go, too. For a long time. You see ? ”

“Yes, I see quite well,” he said swiftly. “You’re to be taken away from me, you’re to be brought out, shown life, you’re to meet lots of young men who will make love to you, you’re to marry one of them, and then. . . . Oh, I see lots of things all committed in the name of happiness. And, mark you, Anne, it’s as it should be. I’m no good to you, not now or ever shall be. For me here, you’re the centre of the universe. I think of you in your little Spartan room getting up in the morning, I see you in the garden, with the dogs, biting your pretty lips trying to paint—and I’m content. But when you go away, out of your setting, you’ll be lost to me, my dear, and I shall learn to do without you. Don’t think I don’t appreciate what you offered just now. I do, oh, yes, I do, and it’s all the more flattering because you made it just when the gates are opening wide for you. Don’t cry, little sweetheart. I love you with all of me that’s left. But I’m no longer young and I no longer cross swords with fate—perhaps because I can’t be bothered. And I’m intensely selfish, Anne, such an egotist that you can have no conception of the enormous trouble I take to protect myself from all discomfort. You think love is a tender thing, a beautiful thing, a long lingering romance. Well, I’m glad in a way that it will fall to someone else’s lot to show you how beautiful and tender it is—I’m being brutal.”

She got out of her chair and took his arm.

“It’s all right. It’s only because you’re hurt yourself.”

He stood rigid, and then suddenly laughed. “No, Anne dear, you mustn’t credit me with finer feelings. I simply haven’t got any—and don’t try to understand

me. I'm a hard-bitten fool, and I've made one woman hate me intensely. And I knew our little sentimental attachment would have to end soon. If I were free—well, the story might be different. I might have been vain enough to try to hold you, but now I'd rather wipe the whole thing out. You must forget me——”

“You mean you will try and forget me?”

“You're too disturbing.”

Then her lips really trembled. “But what about me, Ernest? I do love you, really. I haven't done anything. Why should you cast me right out? Why can't we meet sometimes and be friends, if you won't . . . well . . .”

“No—that's quite impossible. You go away and throw yourself into your new life, though what that wretched brother-in-law of yours is going to do, heaven only knows—and in six months' time come back and tell me about your latest young man. Now you must go; I must do some work.”

Anne, suddenly frightened, scrambled out of her chair and clung to him with all her strength, as if with her arms she could reach his mind. Little incoherent sentences came to his ears: “Please, don't give me up. I'm not a child, I know what I'm doing. Please—please. I can't bear it. I don't want to go away . . .”

She felt his hand on her hair, stroking it; she felt his lips on her head, but soon his strong invulnerability penetrated her emotion and she gave up the struggle. After all, she knew him so little. Her inexperience suddenly weighed on her like a load. Vaguely she guessed that an older woman would know how to cope with the situation, would subtly turn the tables. But she was just Anne—nothing more. No inner life, no particular knowledge of anything, of people or countries

or books, just a simple little girl called Anne, with a pretty face and figure—there for all the world to see. How could she hope to hold him? A little sentimental attachment, he had said. Just because she happened to be close by and there was no other woman at the moment in his life, he had allowed himself to drift into a charming slight love affair.

She was ashamed. A feeling of intense inferiority made her tear herself away and stand alone in the middle of the room like a naughty schoolgirl. From the region of the kitchen came brisk sounds alternating with periods of silence. Mrs. Clements listening, of course, and probably reckoning up the time she stayed there. She would tell Mrs. Olley, and then everybody in the village would know she had spent a good half-hour in Ernest's company alone.

Ernest watched her amusedly; then his expression turned to sadness. "Don't think bad things of me, Anne."

"I'm not," she answered sullenly, "I'm thinking of myself." Her nails pressed themselves into the palms of her hands. "Do you know what I shall do? I shall go to London with Cicely and I shall try every single thing that turns up. I'll go everywhere I can and see everything and . . . and do everything. It's the only way. But I shan't fall in love, I won't, I won't. Anyway, it's silly, you always look a fool—besides, it hurts."

"You'll disappoint other people."

"I don't care—I hope I shall."

Still deliberately detached, he told her gently: "It's no use trying to get your own back on life, Anne dear. Where life is concerned, we are like dogs. We have to take our whippings and our kicks from a superior being

who regulates our lives. We may yelp and bite and whine, but in the end we are forced to heel. You'll learn that."

Anne looked at him, arrogant, self-possessed, tall, strong. She flung back:

"You—you organize your own life. You don't care what happens to other people."

"There are various ways of coming to heel," he reminded her, and then: "When are you going away?"

"It's rather vague at the moment, but Cicely wants to go up this week to buy some clothes, and she is trying to persuade Jim to throw up his job here and do some research work in London. We only heard yesterday."

"All very thrilling," he said unconvincingly, and began a restless prow around the room again.

Anne, feeling absurdly at a loss, said she thought she must go. Sore and miserable, she added:

"Mother wants to know if you would care to come to dinner to-morrow night?"

With his back to her he was staring at an old framed sampler.

"Do you want me to come?" he asked gruffly without turning.

Lying bravely in a poor effort to rescue her fallen pride, she blurted: "Not particularly."

He crossed to her and enveloped her with his arms. "Poor little darling. It's all so hard for you. You can't pretend—that's why I love you. For God's sake go on being honest, Anne, don't try to act. Promise me."

"It's all so difficult." Her puzzled eyes searched his for a solution. "I don't understand—anything."

He pressed her young, soft body to him.

"You will—all in good time. Yes, I'll come to

dinner and join in the rejoicing at your good fortune. Kiss me."

Obediently she kissed him softly and shyly until the renewed clatter in the kitchen sent her running out of the casement window and through the garden. Then she slackened her pace and walked soberly between deep hedges, thinking. Unlike Cicely, she responded to the beauty around her, and, as she walked on, some of the pain in her heart left her. She had been perfectly truthful when she told Ernest she would rather stay in the country than go to town. The monotony to her was not irksome, and until now she had no idea of developing her own personality. Quite content to associate herself with the garden, the change of seasons, the round of trifling duties, it had not occurred to her to pine and long for restless diversions. She enjoyed the occasional tennis parties given by people in the neighbourhood, picnics and visits to the local cinema. But young men were scarce. One by one as they grew up they migrated to the towns or were scattered wide when they joined the army or navy. She read a certain amount, and her vivid imagination, combined with intuition, gave her an understanding beyond her years. As she thought over her interview with Ernest Faulkner, she saw him and herself as two puppets in a scene. She had made a fool of herself—an utter fool. All last night she had missed sleep thinking the matter out. At dawn, with the first twittering of birds in the wistaria round her window, the issue seemed perfectly clear. She had believed Ernest when he said he loved her. She undoubtedly loved him. They could not marry, therefore she was prepared to face a scandalized village and throw herself wholeheartedly into this romance. And he had merely laughed

at her—just refused to take her seriously. The whole scene had been fantastic and artificial—the things he said—the way he said them. Just one little fact remained, hard and substantial: he did not want her. Her chin went up as she walked faster. It was a hard-hearted and defiant Anne who informed her mother that Ernest Faulkner had accepted her invitation to dinner.

Mrs. Simpson utterly refused to be carried away by excitement. Cicely, when she ran up to tell her family the wonderful news, strained her ears at her end of the wire, trying to catch an idea of her mother's reactions. Once or twice in the middle of a spate of words she had had to break off and ask, "Are you there?" Next day, she felt nettled that her mother did not welcome her generous offer of a share in a London home, new clothes, a new life, and agree that this was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened.

"No, my dear," said Mrs. Simpson firmly, "I'm too old and settled for that sort of thing. I'll stay here in my cottage and look after the garden, and they will be ready for you to come back to whenever you want. Someone in the family must have an anchor. I will come up and see you occasionally, and I certainly don't intend to interfere with your plans."

"But, mother darling, don't you see what a solution it is to all our difficulties? It's like a fairy tale. Anne will be taken out of herself, she'll forget Ernest Faulkner. Colin can go to Switzerland, Jim can do his research in London, and I—I can do all the things I want. It's too amazing. I simply can't believe it's true. But it would be so lovely to have you there with us."

"No, my dear," repeated Mrs. Simpson. "No."

"Why not?"

"Well, because"—she paused—"I don't know how to explain it, but I should really be a stumbling block to you all. I couldn't stand the racket, and you and I would all the time be making efforts to please each other. Besides, I don't wish to be shocked."

"Shocked? I don't understand."

"But you will."

Cicely turned away. "You do rather take the thrill out of things, mother. Besides," she returned to the fight, "we can't possibly leave you here all alone."

"Now, my dear, you're talking foolishly. I got on perfectly well by myself before you all arrived, and I shall enjoy being alone for a short time."

"A short time?"

"Well, we'll talk about it again after six months, shall we? Now that's settled, my dear . . ."

Colin, his face white with suppressed excitement, listened to their talk. His fate would be the last to be discussed, he knew that. But, quite resigned to waiting, he lingered around, and the chickens could do without their food for another half-hour. Escape—of the body as well as the mind. Health—perhaps perfect health—here alone was freedom. A weakling, a parasite no more. Expand, that was the thing he wanted to do most of all. Lungs first, then brain. Queer to think that money could do that for you. People expended all their energies, health even, on getting money, and then spent the money on getting back their health and energy. Funny. Cicely's godfather had died through overwork, poor devil. Wonder if he realized all that his money was going to do—how it would change the lives of a whole family.

His mother was right, of course. She would be a

fish out of water in London. She loathed being sociable. Cicely was quite certain Anne's problem was solved. She would attract many a suitable young man in London. So easy. How would it all work out? And old Jim? What about him?

"Darling," Cicely addressed him excitedly, "how would you like to go straight off to Switzerland? See a specialist first, of course. That man Jim knows . . ."

Dr. Jim Ferguson received the news when he arrived back at nine o'clock in the evening. Man-like, he would not commit himself to any opinion. He wished to think it over—sleep on it. Cicely, in the two hours' interval between receiving the news and imparting it to Jim, had thought fast and furiously. Already her plans were cut and dried. Breathlessly she expounded them to a bewildered Jim while he ate cold beef and pickles in the dining-room.

"Don't you think so, darling? Isn't that a good idea? What do you say to that? I thought you could do that."

"I must think it over," he said once or twice helplessly. But it was not until he was in the act of undoing his collar in the dressing-room that a thought struck him. He went into Cicely's room. She was already in bed, arms behind her fair head as she lay back on her pillows, her eyes shining and awake.

"I say, it's just occurred to me, Snooks," he said mildly. "It doesn't really matter whether I agree or not about things now, you are your own mistress. Of course," he added hastily, "you always have been. I mean, I've always wanted you to feel you could do as you liked. We agreed on that, didn't we? But I suppose,

however you look at it, the person who holds the purse strings really has the last word."

Cicely sat up, startled.

"But, Jim, you mustn't look at it like that, darling. It's our money—not just mine. I shan't dream of doing anything without asking your advice first. It isn't as if you hadn't any. I mean, I shan't be just a rich wife to a penniless husband. Besides, we'll use mine for your work and you'll be able to make much more in London—and do the things you want to do."

With a big effort he pulled his collar free.

"Yes, yes. But it all needs thinking over. I can't just chuck my work here and leave them in the lurch. Besides, it's harder than you think for an unknown man to start in London. It'll take time to get in somewhere."

Cicely had thought of that, too.

"Yes—I know. But you might give your services at St. Mildred's in the laboratory, and then you can have a private lab. at home to do what you like. They think a lot of you at St. Mildred's; after all, it isn't as if you hadn't kept in touch. Those papers and things you've read every year and all those meetings you've been to."

Her enthusiasm was wasted. Jim continued to look anxious and worried. Impatiently she thought how extraordinary it was that with opportunity staring him in the face he was loth to grasp it.

"Darling," she said, "don't be a stick-in-the-mud when there's a nice firm dry bank to climb on to. Our lives needn't be so serious now. After all, we've got what most people struggle for all their lives, and we are still young."

He took up an oddment from her dressing-table,

examined it carefully without really seeing it, and put it down again.

"Look here, Snooks," he spoke decisively, "I don't want to stand in your light for a moment, and I'm pleased for your sake that you will be able to do things you want to do. But to me, money is only a means to an end. Not the most important thing in life."

"You mean your work is more important?" she asked him slowly. I'm not important, she was thinking to herself, I don't count, he never gives me a thought as long as I'm there. It isn't fair.

Having expressed himself more fully than usual, he now retired back into his shell. With a little apologetic smile, he answered her: "Well, you see, when you live surrounded by sickness and disease and misery, it doesn't seem vitally necessary to amuse oneself and enjoy expensive luxuries."

"But, Jim, you're looking at it from a wrong angle. You will be able to help now—you'll be able to do research work, which you've always wanted to do. Besides, I can't see that by buying a few clothes and going about a bit I'm making conditions worse for those people. In fact, spending money helps trade. On the other hand, if I stay here and invest the money, I shan't be doing them any good either."

"No, no, my dear, I know all that. It's elementary. No, what I do feel is that individual effort in the right direction is needed."

"What you mean, really," said Cicely pointedly, "is that you hate being sociable or going about. You've got into a rut here and you want to stay in it. Can't you see my point of view at all?"

No personal ambition in Jim. Just an idealist without

practical capacity. Pity, so clever really, everybody said so. He'd have to be pushed—urged on. No use getting angry and impatient with him, poor old darling.

Characteristically he shirked the issue.

“Well, it's time you went to sleep, Snooks ; you're over excited. We'll talk it over in the morning. It seems to me we're both typical of our sex. You want to get as much out of life as you can, and I want to put as much into it as I can. It occurred to me this afternoon when you were at the hospital. We may both be right or wrong, but it's not worth worrying about. Anyway, whatever we do, we'll always stick together, won't we ? ”

He came to her and kissed her.

“Yes, Jim,” she said meekly, and as soon as he had gone she lay thinking of the various strings she could pull to get him the St. Mildred's appointment . . .

III

IN spite of everything, Cicely insisted on looking upon her rôle of heiress as a huge adventure. Like so many people who have always been irked by the lack of money, she saw in her heritage a solution of all their troubles.

"Just think," she said to Anne when they were comfortably seated in a first-class carriage on their way to London, "what a lot we can do to improve our faces, for instance—and clothes—not to mention our minds. Anne, we'll have a lovely time. All our dreams come true. Dressmakers, beauty parlours, house agents."

Anne, a trifle wan, asked listlessly :

"What do we do first?" She was thinking of the dinner party last night and how, in spite of the champagne it somehow didn't "go," from her point of view, anyway. Ernest watched her all the time and she watched him. Her mother said afterwards, "Mr. Faulkner really is a charming man after all. He takes trouble to please old women." He gave them the name of a friend of his wife's who "did" clothes in Bruton Street.

"My wife dresses really well," he had said to Cicely, and Cicely had eagerly taken the address. "My wife has a flair for house decoration," he mentioned later, "she might be able to help you," and he gave an address in South Street. His wife—his wife. Every time he said the words, Anne's resentment flared up. It pleased Mrs. Simpson—it gave her confidence in him. Always

a bad sign if married people did not talk about each other.

"When you see her, will you mention that my daughters would like to meet her?" said Mrs. Simpson, artlessly artful.

Smoothly he answered, "I'm too busy to go to London just now, and she hates the country. So I shan't be seeing her for some time. But if Mrs. Ferguson rings her up, she will be charmed to help her."

At that, Anne's heart had lightened a little. Jim had been a bit of a wet blanket too—rather pathetic really. He looked bewildered and serious.

"Well, first," said Cicely, in answer to her question, "I must go and see Messrs. Hunt & Henty and get some money. I've written to say I'm coming. Then a nice lunch with everything we like—perhaps the Savoy Grill—and I must ring up about rooms. Where shall we stay?"

Anne laughed. "Darling, I don't know. Somewhere quiet, I should think, until we've got something to wear."

Cicely considered her own last year's dark blue and white silk dress and Anne's beige jumper-suit which she had sat in a good deal, a fact clearly indicated by a decided protuberance behind.

"All right," she conceded, "for two nights, anyway. Then we'll go somewhere gayer."

They watched the rush of blossoming fruit trees, meadows deep with grass, cows grazing, tender green woods, and Anne said:

"It's almost a pity to leave the country on a day like this."

Cicely was genuinely dumbfounded. "Saying a thing like that just shows . . ."

"Shows what?"

"Well, what a groove you've got into—like Jim. Unless you hate——"

"Hate what?"

"Hate leaving E.F."

Anne kicked her legs impatiently on the opposite seat. "Oh, that. . . . That's all over, anyhow."

"Well—go on," said Cicely after a pause.

"No." Anne's soft lips closed. "No, I don't want to talk about it. It's all finished, that's all."

"Oh!"

"And I hope you won't think of ringing up his wife."

"I certainly shall, Anne. She'll be useful. Besides, I want to see what she's like."

"Well, I shan't come with you."

Cicely lit a cigarette briskly.

"Don't be an idiot. Good for you to see what you're up against."

"I'm not up against anybody," Anne said sulkily, "I don't care a scrap."

"Well, don't look like a funeral, then," Cicely said coaxingly. "You'll be all right in a day or two. After all, money can do lots of things."

"There are lots of things it can't do," said Anne gloomily, "specially if you don't think it's very important."

"You're as bad as Jim. I thought you were pleased about it. You were at first."

Anne busied herself with the pages of the *Tatler*, and suddenly emerged to ask: "Cicely, when we are in

London for good, can I go to an art school—a decent one—and then we might go to Florence later on?”

“Oh, rather,” Cicely said magnanimously. Now she sat back in her cushions with a sense of luxury and did some more planning. Extraordinary how one’s ideas could change in a few days, but odder still how quickly you could get used to a thought. But the glorious part about money was the unexpected life it could give. Instead of gazing forward and seeing years and years of time spent in the same place with oneself getting older, it was possible to look ahead and see—nothing and everything. No future cut and dried, nothing but an exciting adventure waiting to be experienced. But it was strange that of all the family only she and Colin saw it like that.

She wondered about Anne and E.F., as she called him, but decided to ask no more questions. Later, Anne would tell her—not all at once, but by devious methods. She looked forlorn enough, sitting in the corner staring at the *Tatler* and thinking of something else all the time. Cicely told herself she was glad she was not emotional and not in love—it blurred people’s vision so, their perspective went wrong.

Cicely did not even glance at the row of scarlet buses at the station. With dignity she hailed a taxi.

“I must say this is nice,” said Anne, appreciative for the first time that day, “specially as you don’t have to sit on the edge of the seat, staring at the meter and wondering if you’ve got enough to pay.”

“No, we’re done with all that.” Cicely looked content.

They climbed dark stairs in Lincoln’s Inn, and if Cicely had looked upon herself rather as a heroine of

romance, her mood was not likely to last in the matter-of-fact seclusion of the solicitor's office, with Mr. Hunt, crisp and business-like, presiding behind a desk.

He spoke first of his regard for Mr. Crispin, her godfather. He touched on his tremendous capacity for work. "He overdid it, of course," added Mr. Hunt, "I suppose one might say he really worked himself into his grave."

It was Anne who, a little overawed at the gravity of the old man's face, said: "We didn't know him very well. I never saw him. Mother said that he went abroad soon after Cicely was christened. I wonder why he hit on Cicely to leave his money to."

Mr. Hunt tapped a pencil up and down, up and down, and eventually looked at Cicely, ignoring Anne completely.

"Mr. Crispin has a son, you know."

"No, I didn't know. Then why . . . ?" She paused, at a loss. Did one or didn't one ask solicitors questions, or would it be a blow to professional etiquette?

"Why did he make you his heir? Well, I think you should know that only six months ago Mr. Crispin altered his will in your favour."

"You mean, before that all the money was left to his son?"

"Exactly."

Anne's thoughts darted this way and that. She pictured a disappointed young man cut off with a shilling, a black sheep of story-books, handsome of course, but wicked.

"But why did he change his mind?" Cicely was sharp and to the point. As she uttered the words, she was seized by an awful inkling that Mr. Hunt was trying to advise her to give the money back. But, of course,

nothing of the sort. If someone left you something in a will, it was yours for good and all. How stupid of her. Nevertheless, light-heartedness had departed; its place was taken by a growing sensation of responsibility and anxiety to know Mr. Crispin's reasons.

"Chiefly because his son is an anti-vivisectionist. Yes, I really do believe that was the chief reason. You see, Mrs. Ferguson, your godfather was brought up in a hard school. He was, I suppose, quite ruthless where animals were concerned. He made his money by the breeding and slaughtering of sheep, and it irritated him beyond words that a young man should sentimentalize over animals. Animals are slaves of man, he always said. But at the same time he had more pity than anyone else I know for human suffering. Anything, everything, should be sacrificed in order to alleviate it, he considered."

"Then why didn't he leave his money to hospitals or something?" broke in Anne.

"He didn't believe in large institutions either. He thought there was too much squandering of money in such places. But he had a tremendous confidence in women or, I should say, in what he considered to be 'a good woman'—her judgment, sympathy and understanding. He made enquiries about you, Mrs. Ferguson—he even took the trouble to go down to your village and see you in the village post-office, I believe it was—and he also made investigations about your husband and his research work."

"Good heavens," said Anne, "and we never heard about it."

"I believe he pretended to be a commercial traveller," said Mr. Hunt shortly.

A most disconcerting sensation was gradually creeping over Cicely, a feeling that the guilt was being ruthlessly removed from her gingerbread, that Mr. Hunt's sympathies were all for the son whom she had superseded. Feebly she said :

"But I can't think why my godfather didn't come to see me, if he was so interested."

"He was only over in this country for a short time. He was a very purposeful man and he loathed being just sociable."

Anne's mind had flickered already over the case and touched on most of the aspects. Motives and reasons suggested themselves—and a great deal behind all this. Questions rose to her mind to be immediately suppressed. It was extremely difficult to ask Mr. Hunt questions, especially when his pale blue eyes stared right through one's physical body and seemed to penetrate to the mind. Cicely's attitude amused her. She was like a child in danger of having a new toy taken from her. She saw it like that—nothing further. Any other woman would have wanted to know all sorts of things about this son, if he were rich, married, very poor, his profession: but Cicely could see only as far as her own nicely shaped nose and she did not care what went on beyond. Suddenly Anne felt irritated with her; so apparently did Mr. Hunt. He was longing for these questions, but he wished them to come from his client and not from her impertinent little sister. Instead, Cicely asked :

"Do I have to sign documents and things? I presume there were no conditions in the will."

Jim had instructed her to enquire into this matter.

"No." Mr. Hunt's voice was decidedly regretful.

"No conditions whatever. I think he hoped your

husband would make good use of it in his research work. I was to tell you that. You see," he gazed at Cicely's fair face keenly, "he had apparently great confidence in you."

"Well, that's all very flattering." Cicely gave a short laugh. "And, of course, it will help a great deal—the money, I mean. We are very hard up, Mr. Hunt."

"Many people are that, of course, at the present time."

Then at last the thought, deep in the minds of the two others, reached hers. She said:

"Is Mr. Crispin in urgent need of money?"

"Well . . ." he moved his large body in his chair, "well—I wonder if I can make you understand the position of a man of forty who has always been made to believe that one day he would certainly inherit a large fortune. He takes risks he otherwise would not take—with his own income, I mean. He does not bother to insure himself. He may want to marry but puts it off because his present circumstances are not really good enough for two and he thinks the future is worth waiting for. In lots of ways the knowledge controls his actions."

"You mean he loses ambition?" Cicely put in quickly. "Still, that's his fault. No one ought to bank on a dead person's money."

A silence fell. Anne, now quite determined not to ask questions, gazed out of the window into the old gardens steeped in sunshine. Was Cicely being ungenerous—in her place she would have promptly voted the man half the money—or obstinate, or just stupid?

Mr. Hunt, too, seemed momentarily at a loss. Anne was quite sure, too, that he was overstepping the boundary of his functions in his urgent desire to make

Cicely see Mr. Crispin's point of view. Really he had no right to bully like this. Already he had taken the kick out of the fun. Even Cicely couldn't ignore the moral responsibility that went with the fortune—or could she? Anne wondered, and was suddenly lost in admiration for her sister as she heard her saying :

“Well, Mr. Hunt, I have not much time to spare this morning. Shall we settle the most important matters now . . . ”

Thinking it would be amusing to explore the Inn gardens, Anne thereupon left them to their dreary crackling documents and went out into the sun. . . .

When Cicely, half an hour later, emerged into the garden, Anne was a little surprised at her air of jubilation.

“Now,” she said lustily, “that’s done. He’s arranged for credit at the bank, so we can go and do what we like.”

Anne was staring with awe-struck eyes at some barristers going by. Their gowns flowing around them, their wigs perched jauntily on their heads, their hands full of papers, they walked on with eyes which saw nothing of the beauty of the day.

“I say, I do think the law is cruel, Cicely. I mean that poor son without a bean. I’ve been thinking it over, and I do honestly think you ought to give him some of the money. You don’t really want it all.”

But Cicely’s cool, decided tones broke in.

“Don’t be so childish, Anne. You can’t play fast and loose with a fortune like this. You heard what the old man said. Mr. Crispin wanted me to have the money—all of it—and I shall keep it and do the best I can with it. I’ve got this man’s address, and when we’re settled in London I shall ask him to come and see us.”

"Where does he live?"

"In some flat in Charles Street. I've forgotten where, but the address is in my bag."

"What does he do?" Anne persisted.

"My dear, how should I know?"

"I s'pose you think he's bound to come and see you," Anne remarked.

"Of course. Why not?" Cicely answered so complacently that Anne wanted to smack her.

And that was the keynote of Cicely's new outlook. She was so sure of the good things money could bring. The world and people were at her feet. She sailed through the days calmly, entering with great assurance expensive restaurants which until now she had visited about once a year, and then only as a great treat and in a flutter of excitement. Decreeing that until they knew what was really worn they would not go to the address Ernest Faulkner had given them for clothes, she conducted Anne to a large store and bought each of them a very expensive outfit so that they could face house-agents and head-waiters with suitable dignity. Quite tireless, her mind raked over details, missing scarcely any, while her body was subjected to ceaseless activity. It was hot, and after five days Anne longed for the cool of the garden at Brook Cottage, but firmly Cicely took her to see houses and flats while her feet ached, her head swam and her heart was sore. At night, through the murmur of far-away traffic, and in spite of the deep comfort of her luxury hotel bedroom, with its mirrored and lighted let-in cupboards, gloriously sprung mattress, private bathroom and freshly painted sea-green walls and real linen sheets, she could hear one voice, was aware of one being only, and that one so unattainable

that all her youthful self-will and need rose up in a shriek of protest against the necessity for control and patience and against this sense of frustration. Why should things come within one's orbit and shine with infinitely desirable lustre, only to be snatched teasingly away? If she ever had a baby, she reflected fiercely, as she lay on her back staring into the darkness, she would not dangle in front of its eyes bright, breakable toys meant to be looked at and not touched. Only solid ones that could be handled and enjoyed should it have. She was thankful that Cicely, in the whirl of things to do, forgot to question her about Ernest. It was as though she had already swept all thoughts of Weston and Brook Cottage, the village and people and associations there, aside, and could think only of her new life in London.

The question of where to live was a difficult one to decide. She would have liked to be right in London, to have all the movement and life within easy reach, but in the end it was Amber, not Jim, who was the deciding factor: although she told Anne it was on account of Jim that she had decided on Hampstead.

"He must have a room to work in," she said dutifully, "and he hates noise."

"He'll hate a flat," Anne told her. "Why not take a house?"

But Cicely, a violent reactionary against the responsibilities and inconveniences of another house, was quite determined on a really modern flat with lots of bathrooms and labour-saving gadgets. She fell for one on the peak of Hampstead Heath, extremely modern and extremely expensive.

"After all, you must pay for position and fresh air

and views and open spaces. Amber would be miserable sniffing in a London street."

"Yes, but," Anne put in a final objection, "it's in a block. It'll give Jim an awful inferiority complex. He'll say he feels like a rabbit in a warren. I've heard him say that sort of thing before about a crowd of different families in one building."

"My dear, this isn't a large block, and the flat has three bathrooms, and he can step right out of the door on to the Heath."

Anne, not really very enthusiastic one way or the other, said she realized it would be very nice for Amber, and let it go at that. Privately she told herself she would rather live in a flat in Hampstead than in a house in London, but an inexplicable sympathy for her mild-mannered brother-in-law made her raise her feeble objection.

And so a seven years' lease was signed and sealed. Cicely made several more visits to the offices of Mr. Hunt, unaccompanied by Anne. Her manner retained an entirely business-like quality which discouraged all talk not strictly formal.

Anne emitted a sigh of relief when Cicely announced at last that they must go back to Weston, "to talk over details with Jim."

"Is that necessary?" Anne asked drily, and watched the colour mount in Cicely's fair cheeks.

IV

WHILE Cicely was away in London, Jim Ferguson did some furious thinking. That is to say, he did not sit down for hours on end to contemplate, but at odd moments, when he was examining slides under the microscope or on his journeys to see a patient, even when examining a patient or doing a blood count, thoughts cropped up disconcertingly and obtruded themselves between him and the object in hand.

He was worrying and he was unhappy. In his innermost heart he knew for certain that just now he was content to be medical officer of health for the district, to be in charge of the hospital laboratory, to be consulted with a certain amount of deference by the local practitioners, who liked him and valued his opinion, and in his spare time to work at the problem of tuberculosis and asthma. It was satisfactory to be a person with a definite niche.

It was true that sometimes he had allowed his mind to linger longingly on the possibilities of working in a larger and wider sphere. Occasionally he had actually spoken to Cicely of his vague ambition to try himself out in London where he could be in touch with the latest opinions, apparatus, books, men of his own calibre. But these aspirations had really been nothing but dreams. Their realisation had seemed so utterly impossible to a mere bread-and-butter provider. Besides,

to make a change now at his age, with no income of his own outside his work, entailed risk, probably penury, if he failed to make good. It was something of a shock, too, the gradual discovery that Cicely faintly despised him for his lack of ambition.

Now everything had changed. Now there was money, and plenty of it. Opportunity opened its gates wide. He was free of all shackles. He had only to step forward and grasp what the fates had sent so unexpectedly. At night when he arrived home tired, he looked round the charming little old house he and Cicely had lived in since their marriage and saw it with new eyes. Barty became infinitely precious and dear. All its faults—being too near the village street, draughts, the dampness, inconvenient, old-fashioned, basement kitchen—were now mere trifles. Its peace enveloped him. With Amber at his side, he walked out, on the night before Cicely came back, into the dark, scented garden at the back of the house and drank in the warm air. A dog barked in the distance, a motor-cycle flashed along the road and tore the darkness with flaming headlight and the quiet with raucous noise, then disappeared. His thoughts played around a case he and the house physician were intensely interested in. The spinal fluid had produced negative results. No tubercle bacillus. They had thought it might be cerebro-spinal meningitis, but the agglutination tests were negative. He himself had been of the opinion all along that it was a cerebral abscess, but the others stuck to the idea of T.B. Well, they would know to-morrow when he did the post-mortem examination. If it was T.B. he surely would have found it. Slide after slide he'd examined personally.

Now back again to the future. London—at sea in its turmoil—a new house—new friends and colleagues—pitting his brains against better men than himself—fight, exertion, and finally—it was at this stage that his mind shied frantically—a new Cicely. Cicely thrusting forward with all her latent energy to the fore: being in the swim, she would call it, her masterful side uppermost. He had always admired the dominant side of her character, her cool decisions, the ability to carry them out, her preciseness—they had attracted him from the first, but . . . Here he paused and thought back to the day when he had met her. He'd just been appointed to the hospital, to the great joy of his mother, who lived at Bath. In fact, it was partly on her account that he'd turned his back on London and taken the appointment at Redlow, so that he could see her more often. It was Pound Day at the hospital, and a lovely afternoon, in the middle of June. She came in at the big door carrying a mass of pink monthly roses in one arm and a huge basket piled high with provisions in the other, quite unhurried, calm and cool. All very romantic, of course, except that she did not even notice him. She was much too intent on the matter in hand—to arrive at her particular ward without spilling or dropping anything.

He was accustomed to capable women; he met them daily in the wards. But there was something about her aloofness, it might be sex-unconsciousness, that struck him forcibly. Somebody rather disparagingly had called her "completely nice." It was exactly that that appealed to him. He could rely on her to look fresh and clean at breakfast. She was not the sort of woman who would trail down in a frilly pink satin wrapper and pour out his coffee and grumble about the weather. For instance,

like Ethel. Tantalizing and amusing, of course, but always with the knack of making everyday occurrences and things seem artificial. A bright, sunny room in the morning—Ethel coming in, and the whole thing took on the aspect of a “set” on the stage. Funny, that. Now she was married to a stockbroker and played bridge and golf and went abroad every year and had enough money to indulge her assumed incompetence for domestic problems. Cicely did not know about Ethel, at least, only as a name. She knew nothing of the emotional storm Ethel had raised in his well-ordered life.

The whole thing had left him flat and exhausted, with a horror of anything approaching a scene. Pumped dry of all demonstrative passion, he was quite content with the strong tie of affection between him and Cicely. She demanded nothing more, either. And now—what? How would this cursed money and the new life affect her? He thought, why is it that during life-time a person goes about the offering of money with some delicacy? Mr. Crispin, when he was alive, wouldn't have dared to say to Cicely, “Look here, here's half a million for you. Keep it.” Then why, just because he was dead, should the money be gratefully received, his memory revered because of it, and the huge sum pocketed without question? Curious how some people looked on the possession of money as an unmitigated joy.

Mr. Crispin hadn't stopped and considered that a husband might possibly like working to provide his wife with necessities, and that by bequeathing the money he was abolishing the functions of that husband. Old-fashioned? Perhaps. But he could swear there were heaps of men who would feel the same. All the gaff

about modern life and changed principles suited novelists and playwrights and a few people in large cities, but to the ordinary pedestrian on the sidewalk of life like himself and thousands of others, they did not apply. Life must be a struggle with a prize in view. That was how he felt about it. Cicely had suggested research work as a bait. All very well, but directly the need for making money from your work disappeared, it became a hobby, and men with hobbies were looked on as mere triflers and amateurs.

One could argue that many men had given their life-work to the cause of humanity without thought of personal or monetary success. But for that you simply must have one fixed idea, no wavering, no distractions. Was he strong enough? Had he enough faith in himself to carry through?

At last he went to bed. At intervals he woke and was aware of the wallflower-scented air and the muddle in his brain.

Next day Cicely came back.

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That same morning Mrs. Simpson, coming out of the post-office, ran into Ernest Faulkner with a suitcase in his hand. This was an unusual event, as he rarely appeared in the village. His immaculate grey suit, tidy hat, combined with the suitcase, made her say rather too hopefully, she thought afterwards:

"Why, are you going away?"

"Yes, I've got a sudden craving for the sea. I'm off to Cornwall for a week or two."

He looked down at her square figure with amusement in his eyes. Her children often told Mrs. Simpson they

could read her face like a book, and she thought perhaps this man might, too. Hastily she said, trying to hide her feeling of relief that Anne would not see him :

"Well, that is very nice. I do hope you will enjoy it. The sea must be very nice now—very nice."

She paused and then, as he made no movement, plunged on :

"The children, I mean Cicely and Anne, are coming back to-day, so you will just miss them. They will be sorry. It's all so extraordinary, this money, I mean. Don't you think so ? But I dare say it's a very good thing really, especially for Anne. It's so good for a girl of her age to be able to go about and meet lots of young people and have her mind widened."

How transparent she was being. Of course, he knew what she was driving at. But she must say something about Anne while she had the opportunity. Yet it was difficult with those penetrating eyes on her. Still, after all, she was Anne's mother and the only person in the world who could interfere. It was not easy, though. He was so very much a clever person who would not descend to plain speaking. You couldn't get at him somehow.

He spoke as though soothing a frightened child.

"Don't worry too much about Anne, Mrs. Simpson. She'll be all right. At the moment, like so many girls, she has acquired at school what people call a modern outlook, which really means a muddled sense of values. But underneath, your influence is solid. She's very sensitive, of course, and knocks hurt, poor child."

Mrs. Simpson said in a startled way : "What do you mean, by 'modern outlook' exactly ? I don't quite understand."

He flushed slightly and Mrs. Simpson, observing him, felt distinctly uneasy. What had Anne been up to?

They were standing very near the entrance of the post-office. A few villagers going in and out touched their hats respectfully to Mrs. Simpson, giving Ernest Faulkner at the same time a surreptitious, inquisitive glance.

"Shall we walk along a bit?" he said now, "There's heaps of time for my train." He laughed shortly as they moved away, and then asked:

"How long does it take for a stranger here to be reckoned as one of us? These people look at me as if I were something out of a Zoo."

"That's hard to say," she answered him gravely. "It's doubtful whether they consider drawing an honest man's trade at all. It's nothing personal, their antagonism. Now, if you were a chicken-farmer or bee-keeper . . . But tell me, if you don't mind, what you meant just now about Anne's 'modern outlook.' I'm sorry if I'm being a tiresome old woman," she added as he hesitated, "but do try to understand that it's difficult for me to guide her. I'm a back number, I know that, but you're a man of the world."

She guessed he hated being pinned down like this by her clumsy methods, but she was quite determined now. Her cheeks were pinker than usual and her feet plonked themselves firmly on the road. She saw his mouth draw in at the corners and his dark chin thrust itself out. A bad-tempered man, she concluded, and temperamental. He thinks I'm a fussy sentimental old nuisance.

Quite suddenly his face cleared and he answered her gently.

"Look here, Mrs. Simpson, I know you're suspicious of me—like all the village people—and it's really because I'm living apart from my wife—isn't it? And, of course—there's Anne. You're afraid I shall influence her in the wrong direction. Will it relieve your mind if I tell you that I'm only going away to-day because she's coming back here?"

Completely taken by surprise, she murmured awkwardly: "I see . . . That's very nice of you."

Then he had said, "Good-bye," and was striding away in the direction of the station, swinging his suitcase.

As she slowly walked on, she gradually realized that he had not defined Anne's "modern outlook," he had not given her any advice, he had not in any way intimated how he felt about Anne or how she felt about him. And she had hoped so much to have the whole thing clear and plain before her, tidied up, so to speak.

Still, it was a relief to know he was out of the way for a bit. An attractive creature—full of guile and cleverness. She imagined Anne's lovely little crestfallen face when she was told he'd gone, and felt quite sorry. But why had he gone? When she came to think of it, it was odd. How lovely these cuckoo-flowers were in the ditch. No, she couldn't leave all this and the garden to look after Anne and Cicely in London. No—it was too much to expect of a country woman growing old. They must learn to stand alone. After all, they told her nothing in the end, nothing about their true feelings, so how could she help? Henry had always told her she would make a better grandmother than mother, meaning, she supposed, that she understood young children better than grown-up ones. That was true. Henry had been such a good husband—not unlike Cicely's Jim, really—

so conscientious about his patients and sympathetic, but unambitious. Quite content with his rôle of country doctor till the day he died. Yes, very much like Jim.

Colin was the one she would miss most of all. After all, a sick grown-up was almost equal to a child.

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"So you see, Jimmy dear," Cicely ended up by saying as they sat by the open window after dinner overlooking the garden, "the money is really a sacred trust. It's like fate, isn't it? Mr. Crispin picking you out, I mean, to do the research work, when you've been wanting to do it for so long. I feel so proud that he trusted me, too."

Jim filled his pipe thoughtfully. He told himself that now was the time to shoot his bolt or for ever to be silent. Why be afraid, after all, of Cicely? So transparently delighted, she was, with all her doings and her possessions. She couldn't see the fundamentals for the trimmings. Yet he couldn't see things clearly either. He only knew this going to London business was an enormous step in the dark and he was loth to take it. He temporized. After a few minutes he spoke between the puffs of his pipe.

"I must think, Cicely. Of course, what you tell me certainly makes a difference. But why the old boy couldn't have set aside a certain sum for the work, I can't imagine. It's all unsatisfactory somehow."

She said quickly: "You mean it was foolish of him to trust me?"

He smiled at her. "Well, all women are such unknown quantities, Snooks, even," he added a trifle sardonically, "good women."

Cicely was tired. A long morning shopping, the hot

train journey and now this damping of her schemes by Jim. It was not exactly what he said, it was just this feeling that he was silently antagonistic. She gazed at his face in the dusk. It was as non-committal as a shut card.

With difficulty she restrained herself. "Well, tell me what you propose to do," she demanded in a hard voice.

"Well, if I could have my way," he answered her softly, "I should stay here and carry on. I've been thinking a lot since you've been away. Don't you think you could go on being happy here? You could go up to town quite often and take Anne to the sea, and I could devote more time to this asthma and T.B. research work."

Perhaps she had known all along what he would say in the end. Her bubbling anger and impatience died down. Hopeless, spent, that's how she felt for the moment, and entirely alien. All her bright visions of sharing her fun with Jim vanished. She stood alone. He simply didn't understand. He went on as she was silent.

"We've had such a pleasant time in this house on the whole. It seems a pity to leave it. We could do some improvements. Put down a new court and have old Ketley every day instead of twice a week. You could hunt a bit. You could buy the meadows too and expand the garden. Lord, there's a lot one could do," he added dreamily.

A grating sound as she got up and pushed back her chair. She went to the standard lamp and switched on the light. Blinking, he gazed at her and noticed for the first time that her fair hair looked different. Tidier—it fitted her head somehow in deep waves. Her lips were pinker, she'd done something to her eyebrows, her

nails shone like coral shells and her dress outlined her body. She radiated a strange scent like new-mown hay. She stood looking down on him.

"Listen, Jim. I'm not going to stay here. I . . . I hate it. I've loathed it for a long time." Her lips trembled. "And I think it's simply dreadful that a man like you—healthy, with a fine brain—should want to go on pottering. I can't understand you, I simply can't."

He avoided her eyes now and looked down at his pipe as he pushed more tobacco into the bowl. Never before had he had such a straight answer from Cicely, never before had he expressed himself so clearly. They had always humoured and studied each other, tested one another, given way. It was true it had generally been Cicely's way in the end, but only because in the end he had seen that hers was the better one.

Now he must be careful. They had reached a crisis. Not a very spectacular one. But while they had been parted, each had galloped along a different path of thought and ideas, and now crash! bang! here they were colliding. The beginning of a different Cicely—a new era—was at hand. So he took refuge—he did not realize it as such—in concern for her physical well-being. Getting up from his chair, he went to her and took her wrist. His sensitive fingers found her pulse.

"You're tired and overwrought, Snooks dear," he told her gently. "Run along to bed, and I'll give you something to make you go to sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

"I want to talk now," she said obstinately, "I've made up my mind."

He led her away, as he had many times before, and helped her to undress, throwing the delicate under-things

carelessly on to a chair across the room. Cicely had always rescued them on these occasions, jumping out of bed after he had tucked her up and kissed her and gone away, and folded them into a neat pile. To-night, although they were new and the most expensive she had ever had, they stayed in a heap on the chair, crushed and forlorn, while she lay staring into the darkness, her lips drawn into a hard, determined line. And because she was angry with Jim and his obtuseness, she asked herself if all women found marriage so tame. A few kisses when you were engaged, a fierce onslaught when you were married, which left you with the feeling you were just being used and you had to put up with it because you were married. After that, the whole thing growing into a habit. Now she didn't care if Jim saw her with her face smothered in cream and looking hideously plain, or with a shingle cap unbecomingly tied tight round her face, because he didn't seem to notice. Romance! She pouted in the darkness and tried again to go to sleep. Then another thought pushed its way through. Perhaps it's something in me, perhaps I'm cold and hard. Love has done something to Anne—it's given her a kind of power. Funny, that. Although she's young, she's got something I haven't got.

Suddenly, impatiently, she switched on the light and jumped out of bed, and attacked the heap of inert clothes on the chair. It was silly to let her thoughts wander. You got nowhere if you weren't practical. It must be because she was tired. By the time her things were carefully folded and put away in the drawers, she had regained the conviction that she was the luckiest woman in the world to have so much money. She could manage Jim. . . .

That same night, after a cold meal during which Anne had told the interested Mrs. Simpson and Colin of her London experiences, they went out into the dusky garden. Mrs. Simpson suddenly remembered a rose which needed more water and sent Colin to fetch her enormous watering-can.

Anne sniffed in the soft air.

"It's good to be back, mummy," she said, and tucked her arm in her mother's. They strolled. Their feet crunched lightly on the path. They wandered out of the gate into the road. The hedges, heavy with white hawthorn, glimmered ghost-like as they passed and radiated their bitter-sweet scent. They walked on silently.

Mrs. Simpson smiled to herself when they found themselves outside Ernest Faulkner's cottage.

"Why," said Anne, "it's all dark. Just as if it were shut up."

"I know," Mrs. Simpson answered mildly, "I met him this morning on the way to the station."

"This morning?" Anne thought: Oh, why didn't we come back yesterday? We might have, instead of going to see those beastly carpets and going to that rotten film.

"Yes," her mother went on innocently, "he said he was sorry to miss you. By the way, we had quite a little chat about you, my dear. I couldn't think what he meant by one thing he said."

"About me?" Anne's voice was eager.

"Yes. He said he thought you had a modern outlook. What do you think he meant?"

A long silence followed, and Mrs. Simpson was aware

of a sudden startled pressure on her arm. At last, Anne said shortly :

"Heaven knows what he meant. Anyway, I hate being discussed. He had no right to say such a thing to you about me."

"Hadn't he?"

"Of course not."

"Well, Anne, I hope he hadn't. I shouldn't like to think that one of my children would allow their feelings to run away with them. That's the way I interpret the term, 'modern outlook,' being uncontrolled and immodest."

The arm under hers was suddenly withdrawn and Anne, still walking on, but faster, burst out :

"I don't know what you're driving at. You're just being horribly suspicious and old-fashioned. Anyway, why should girls just sit in a corner and wait for a man until he deigns to notice them? Modern outlook—such a silly expression, anyway—it just means more equality, that's all. You must have begun the discussion, mother. It's so unlike him to talk about anyone."

Poor child, she was indeed showing her feelings now, reflected Mrs. Simpson. Upset by his disappearance and his words, by everything. Yet not so modern that she couldn't feel, after all.

"The whole conversation arose quite naturally, I assure you, my dear. It's foolish of you to be annoyed. You know best, of course, if you have reason to be angry with yourself or with him."

Another long silence, and then :

"Well, it's a good thing I am going to London, away from . . . all this."

"Perhaps—only . . ."

"Only what, mother?" Her voice was cold and hard.

"Only—be as modern as you like, Anne dear, but don't, please, don't cheapen yourself. Be your nice self."

"Nice? Nice? After what you hinted at just now?"

"You're being foolish now," she spoke firmly. "We'll say no more about it. You're going to have a lovely time away with Cicely."

"Yes—and I'm looking forward to it—awfully. Anything to get away from here."

"That's right," said Mrs. Simpson peacefully.

They eventually reached the gate of Brook Cottage, where Colin stood waiting for them.

"Where on earth have you been? Too dark to water now, mother."

"It doesn't matter now, dear. Are the chickens all shut up?"

"Hours ago. Jim's been on the 'phone. He wanted to speak to you."

"Oh. Have you any idea what he wanted?"

"He sounded dismal enough. Anyone would think he'd been made a bankrupt instead of a rich man. I haven't patience with him, have you, Anne?"

"I think," Anne said slowly, "on the whole I'm rather sorry for Cicely."

"Good Lord, just now at dinner you were all on Jim's side—about the flat and all that."

"Well, I'm not now, anyway. I wouldn't mind betting Jim hasn't noticed her new dress and hair and nails and everything, and she took so much trouble to give him a surprise. What's the good of taking trouble if no one's going to appreciate it?"

"I noticed your dress, you idiot, directly I saw you."

"Yes, but you don't count."

"No, I suppose not." Colin looked thoughtful. "That shows sex and dress are correlative. I don't believe women dress for each other, either. Suppose twenty women were cast on a desert island, do you think they'd have dress-shows? The newest modes in grass skirts and flower head-dresses? Not on your life. Of course they wouldn't. But put just one man down among them and there'd be a mannequin parade every day."

Mrs. Simpson yawned. "It's too late to start one of your arguments, my dear boy. Besides, do look at your shoes, they're soaked. You'll get another chill—do go and change."

"For God's sake, don't fuss, mother," Colin flashed. He had an inborn resentment against being treated like a delicate invalid. No one but Anne knew how pictures of athletes in action made him feel sick with envy, and how he loathed having to change his socks when they were damp. Cambridge was his deepest regret. One glorious year and then pleurisy. After that, an unhealthy lung, and the choice between a sanatorium or open-air life. Chickens—he never wanted to see one of the blasted things again—except to eat them, and that gave him a savage satisfaction.

Whistling softly to himself, he went off to his room and read himself to sleep.

Anne, in her little room next to his, lay listening to the owls and passing through an agony of rebellious shame. Men were fools and traitors. She hated them all. She hoped lots of them would fall for her in London and suffer the agonies of the damned, while she would stay amused and untouched and watch them writhe and wriggle in the throes of frustrated love. Then she smiled

quickly and thought what a little fool she was. Cicely would be a good antidote to all her introspection. Cicely, their fates—hers and Colin's—were in her hands. Poor old Cicely. One always thought of sane, balanced people as poor. They missed so much. Their minds, desert wastes, void of even one tiny flower of imagination, were all the same very full of sand.

And with visions of pile on pile of vast, limitless sand, she fell asleep.

V

LONDON

CICELY liked her Hampstead flat. Its extreme modernity satisfied her reactionary spirit. The bathroom, in particular, with its clean, shining walls and enclosed bath, shimmering green and deliciously fragrant, pleased her enormously. No more irritating cracks in distempered walls, which widened visibly every day, no more wars against encroaching damp and dust of centuries through walls and ceilings of an old house; no spiders, cockroaches, no old cupboards and garrets to harbour dust and stand as a constant menace to the efficiency of a good housewife.

Chromium plate, let-in cupboards, high-powered electric and gas stoves, expensive, haughty maids who dispensed their domestic services like favours. A new streamlined Rolls nestled in the underground garage. Waking up in the morning in her low bed which took such pains to look like anything but a bed, she gazed out on the Heath and sighed with content. And when Jim wandered in, his hair on end, his old brown dressing-gown tied loosely round his spare form, he struck an incongruous note. So irritating of him to refuse to wear the new figured silk thing she had taken such pains to buy, tiresome of him to look so much like a forlorn hope, although he uttered no word of disapproval or even advice. He just accepted everything, even the research

scholarship at St. Mildred's she had worked so hard for, with something rather like resignation. Only once had he shown any keen interest in her arrangements, and that was when she had spoken of selling Barty. Then he had become fiercely animated, almost feminine, like a tigress defending its young. Anne's remark. He said he would keep the old house on himself; it was necessary to have some place in the country; and then he had become soft and sweet and talked a lot about its being their honeymoon house, their first home and that sort of thing. So silly, really, when all that was in the past and they had a glorious future in front of them. She argued they were going to make a new home—a better one. No good. No good at all. He was firm—rock-like, about it. And so Barty was still theirs, and she had wanted so much to make a clean break. It stood a threat to her freedom. Any time she might be forced into going back. Forced? But why? She was her own mistress now. Her money made her that.

Jim stood about. At last she said, "Well?"

"What are you doing to-day?" he asked her.

"Going to buy some clothes with Anne."

"Buying," he said thoughtfully, looking out of the window. "Buying. It must get rather tiring in the end—acquiring things so easily."

"It's a change, at any rate," she defended.

"Yes, I expect it is—but a little too simple."

She raised herself and spoke with a frankness that had become almost a habit of late.

"Jim, darling, what *is* the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing, as far as I know. I like you to have everything you want, naturally—but you've got it

in spite of me—that's all." Then he turned and went out of the room.

She lay back on her pillows and considered for a minute. After all, it was natural that Jim should be a wee bit jealous of her independence. It wouldn't last. As soon as he became really interested in his work and got it well going, he'd forget everything else. Perhaps the change had been too quick for him. All done in a few weeks. Young Rigby ready to step into his shoes and take over at the County Hospital, and then Jim's meeting with Sir Martin Rapp—manœuvred of course by her—and his suggestion that Jim should apply for the Research Scholarship of St. Mildred's to give him an *entrée*, so to speak, to London medical circles. So Jim was powerless to make excuses. He was not really essential at the Hospital, and the field was made clear for him here. It had all worked out beautifully. Of course, it was a great upheaval and he had always been shy with strangers, but he'd soon make friends with the other men and then he'd be all right.

She dismissed the thought of Jim and nibbled at the thin bread and butter Bennett cut so well.

Anne strolled in. She was already dressed in a neat, short-sleeved thing. She sternly refused to have breakfast in bed. Glibly, she pronounced it unwholesome. She stood in front of the green silk bed, head thrown back, hands clasped behind her.

"Look here, Cicely, something's got to be done about it."

"About what?"

"Well, about all this. It suddenly dawned on me when I was in the bath. This flat is all very well and it's nice to have a car and be able to go everywhere. But

do you realize we don't know a single soul in this place or in London? That's the trouble about being provincial—all your friends are, too."

Cicely sipped her tea contentedly.

"We shall in time, don't worry. I'll give a big dinner-party to Jim's colleagues at the hospital and ask their wives."

Anne looked sceptical.

"You can't do that till they've asked us. They're all senior to Jim and the etiquette is awfully rigid. Jim told me."

"So you've talked about it to Jim?"

"No, silly, of course I haven't. I just put out a few feelers—Jim's very susceptible to them."

"Mrs Wheeler told me to look up her sister in Golder's Green; and the Hawkers have an aunt in St. John's Wood."

"Won't that be jolly? Mrs Wheeler's sister's at least ninety, with one eye, and the Hawkers' aunt is a Christian Scientist and lives on herbs and camomile tea. We might go and make whoopee with her one night, as a great treat."

"July's a bad month, I s'pose, for London. We've missed most of the fun while we've been moving."

Anne pursed her lips.

"Well, darling, much as I adore you and Colin, and you adore us, we do want a little change from each other. It's all very well going to night clubs and grand places to dinner, but if we always go with each other we might as well stay at home. No, we've got to know some people, somehow."

"How?"

Anne reddened. "I dunno. Pick them up, I s'pose."

She turned the subject. "Where are we going to shop?"

"Well, you remember Ernest gave us the address of that woman, 'Vivienne,' who does clothes in Bruton Street?"

"Yes, I hadn't forgotten. I expect she's the kind who only sells her things to intimate friends at a huge price and when they begin to fade away she offers them commission if they introduce other people, and so on."

Cicely looked dubious. Anne shrugged her shoulders.

"We might try there, anyway. Something to do. It'll be a change to talk to somebody."

Cicely was silent. She didn't know quite what she had expected; but this isolation certainly was a surprise. A lot to be said, after all, for the old system of calling and leaving cards on people. It was strange to go shopping in Hampstead and to realize you didn't know a single soul. Strangers everywhere. Shop assistants coldly polite, merely bent on trying to palm off their most expensive goods on a tenant of one of the thirty luxury flats which anyway were an eyesore to those who loved Hampstead Heath and its old-fashioned beauty.

Anne was saying in a cold little voice :

"Perhaps a vicar will call soon. But I doubt if even he will think flat-dwellers are worth bothering about."

Then she added : "Oh, and I've thought of another way. Colin ought to join an air club and we can go with him. That would be rather fun."

"But he's going to Switzerland!"

"He says that will do in the winter. He wants to learn to fly this summer."

Anne was watching her sister closely. Somehow, since

they had come to Hampstead, she and Colin unconsciously had found a partnership. It was two against one. It was Colin who had tackled the subject and brought it to light only this morning when she went into his room. They had been discussing the idea of joining an air club and then she had said: "Well, who's going to ask Cicely?"

Colin, lying full length on the floor, was trying to heave himself up without touching anything. The cult of strength was an all-important subject to him at the moment. Anne looked on, watching the pathetically thin limbs exerting themselves to accomplish something beyond their power.

At her question, he sat up and pounced.

"Do you realize that if we're not jolly careful we shall be treating Cicely like a benefactress instead of a sister, and that won't do at all? Bad for her and rotten position for us."

Anne said quickly:

"No, I do see that. It's two against one and that isn't fair. After all, we do owe a lot to her and . . ."

"Obligation's what you mean, and that's awful. No, we must go on pulling her leg or she'll get pompous and autocratic and we shall be humble and resentful."

"It's difficult," Anne said thoughtfully. And as she waited to see how Cicely took the suggestion of the air club, she saw afresh what a rotten position Cicely was in. Much better if she gave them each an allowance and let them spend it as they liked. But there had been no mention of it. Perhaps Cicely enjoyed her power, then. *

Surprisingly, Cicely said: "Jim must be asked about that. Colin's health must come first." Surprising,

because it was the first time she had really thought of taking Jim's advice. Then she added: "I think I'm rather nervous about flying, Anne—for Colin, I mean."

"You're only being old-fashioned. It would do him a lot of good. Fresh air and all that. Hundreds of people are learning to fly now."

Cicely took up the *Daily Sketch* and remarked:

"Reckless, aren't you, suddenly?"

"Me? No. Not more than usual."

"Oh, yes, you are," Cicely said provocatively. She wanted to make Anne talk, to get behind that defiant attitude she had adopted since she came to London. Her brown eyes were less dreamy. Her cloudy chestnut hair had been reduced by a good hairdresser to an orderly frame for the clear curves of her face and long neck. He had been very clever, thought Cicely, to sweep it off the brow and ears and allow it to curl in a thick mass on her neck.

"Well, I feel restless."

"Miserable?"

Anne flopped on the bed and nursed her knee.

"No—not exactly. A bit hopeless. Cicely, we must *do* something—enjoy ourselves. I want to join an art school later on, but let's have some fun first. It's silly to have lots of money and sit about in this flat pretending we're enjoying it."

"Well, I am enjoying it," Cicely argued, and she really seemed to be telling the truth.

Anne's eyes widened. "I believe you're terribly possessive—you get a lot of kick out of just having things."

Cicely looked cross now. Her pale cheeks grew pink. "Well, I can't help being what I am," she flung out.

"It seems to me that's what makes people unhappy—trying to be what they're not."

"Yes, but you can fight against letting influences make you different."

Then Cicely was all at once in no mood to quarrel. She subsided back in her pillows and said more contentedly: "It's all so uncomfortable analysing yourself. You never did it before you met E.F. Much better to take what comes and stop thinking. Thoughts lead you nowhere."

"Partly true," Anne admitted. "Funny, that. I wonder it being in love makes everybody self-conscious."

Cicely flashed unexpectedly: "Being unhappy makes you conscious of yourself, I'm sure—introspective and all that. Like having a big ache or pain—you simply can't forget it. Then you give yourself up to yourself and it's frightfully boring for other people. Besides, you defeat your own ends."

"Still, it's better to feel something and do unexpected things than regulate your life like a dial on the telephone."

A little superior smile lurked in the corners of Cicely's mouth.

"Well, who's the happier now, at this moment—you or I?"

Anne got up now and stretched herself. Something had to be done about Cicely's superiority.

"Content is what you mean, my dear. You're like a cat with a saucer of milk. You're so busy with it, you wouldn't recognize happiness if it came at this moment—perhaps you wouldn't even be able to take hold of it. But I'm so miserable, I could be happy any second."

Cicely sighed impatiently and returned to the paper. "You talk like a woman of forty instead of a young

girl. I s'pose you're only repeating something you've read."

Anne's shoulders expressed themselves in a hopeless shrug. "Perhaps," she said, and went away.

Madame Vivienne was having a busy morning and an irritating one. In the first place, the prettiest of her mannequins had a large spot on her chin which might develop any moment into a boil. One of her best clients had just been divorced by her husband and fled to America, leaving a trail of unpaid bills. She had had a quarrel the night before with Tommy, whom her friends called her "boy friend," though he was about as old as she was. There was a cigarette burn on one of her best model cloaks, though how it happened was an honest-to-God mystery; she'd been so dreadfully careful with it at the party last night and hadn't let Tommy touch her in the car for fear of spoiling it. She'd have to let it go for twenty guineas now, to that mass of shabby gentility, the Waters woman, and she had meant to ask fifty for it. Besides, it seemed such a wanton waste—to think of it draped round that enormous bulk driving along country roads and then being bundled into a heap by a rough-skinned cloakroom woman at hunt and county balls. Business was bad—even Enid Faulkner was falling off. She sat on a low gold divan and listened to Mrs. Rushlip's strong Manchester voice telling how badly she'd been let down by her latest young man.

"You know he made me learn bridge. Well, yes, he danced too, I will say that for him. And I took an awful lot of trouble to get him invited to Messing Towers with me. Lady Messing made quite a favour of it and I bought him a new dinner-jacket and dressing-gown.

And would you believe it—we played bridge and bridge and bridge. I never seemed to do anything right, whether I was playing with him or whether I wasn't. I carried him all the time, and mind you, I had to pay out a whole lot," her voice rose plaintively, "a lot even for me. One night he'd been more sarcastic than I can say at the table, and I was quite ashamed in front of Lady Messing, and I got ratty and told him to go back to the shop where I'd found him and measure out silk again if he didn't know how to treat a lady, and a few other things I said. And would you believe it, the Messing woman suddenly bristled like an old hen and tried to freeze me with a real dowager look, and said—yes, would you believe the rotten little beast could be so deceptive all the time, and me doing all I could for him. . . ."

"Well, what did she say?" Madame Vivienne was becoming interested. Mrs. Rushlip, realizing at last that she was in the limelight of attention, mopped her heated brow with a large powder-puff.

"Well—believe it or not—you could have struck me down with a feather. She said, 'You can hardly expect us to thank you, Mrs. Rushlip, for taking our cousin away from his work at Wells & Boon after we had used every bit of influence we possessed to get him the position. We hope very much you will make it possible for him to go back!'"

"Yes, it's difficult these days to get anybody into a big store, and if you haven't a title it's practically impossible." Madame Vivienne spoke thoughtfully.

"But selling silk, I ask you! In my young days, such a thing for a gentleman was unheard of. And then, being their cousin all the time. The little sneak!"

"Did you lose much money at bridge?" Madame

Vivienne asked meditatively. She was thinking of giving a bridge party herself very soon.

"Yes—I tell you—a packet." Mrs. Rushlip's thick mouth pouted sulkily.

"Never mind, my dear, you must come and win it back at my flat."

"Yes, but don't you see, I've lost Ronnie now."

"Sh—sh—sh."

Cicely and Anne entered the salon and were approached by Tinette, the head saleswoman. Madame Vivienne, inwardly all attention, talked in her low, husky voice to Mrs. Rushlip about clothes for Scotland, while her languid glance took in the cut of Cicely's perfect Bradley suit and neat shoes and gloves, and Anne's more flamboyant but becoming dark blue taffeta dress and be-ribboned perched hat. Taste and money there, she thought with satisfaction, but not enough chic. They both had a vague country cousin look. She pulled her tailored dress into place and watched Tinette under her heavily mascared lashes, wondering who had introduced them. The tall, fair girl was becoming haughty. Probably didn't know what she wanted but didn't like to admit it.

Madame Vivienne rose and went unobtrusively forward, looking and feeling quietly sympathetic.

"Put on the Patou black," she murmured in Tinette's ear, and Tinette's slim form vanished behind dark curtains.

"Are you Madame Vivienne?" Cicely demanded bluntly, without smiling. She felt at a loss and wished she hadn't come to this noiseless, almost hostile rarefied salon, which was not in the least like a shop. Much more like her idea of a royal reception room. Besides

the pretty saleswoman with her patronizing air made you feel at a disadvantage. Anne wasn't much help, either—she just stood about and looked non-committal, like Jim in his most irritating moods.

"Yes, I am." The dark, short-haired, handsome woman had a pleasant voice and smile. "And I am so glad to see you. We've got some models just over from Paris—by yesterday's plane. I'd love to show them to you, if you can spare a few moments. I—I think you'd appreciate them." Her dark eyes swept Cicely's figure flatteringly. They ignored Anne completely, a fact which was not lost on either of them.

A few minutes later, a cocktail in her hand, soft cushions at her back, an Egyptian cigarette between her lips, and she was talking to Madame Vivienne, entirely at ease.

"Ernest Faulkner told us about you—I understand you know his wife very well," she said. Anne stiffened and looked bored.

"Oh, yes, Enid Faulkner is a very good friend. She's very clever, you know—interior decorations. But, of course, you know her?"

"No. We've never met. Her husband lives in our village." Cicely faltered now, her eyes on Anne's set face. "They—they don't see a great deal of each other."

"So I understand." Madame Vivienne's voice was smooth. "But both very charming people—just bad luck, of course. These things often are. You must meet her—and her son."

"I didn't know there was a son." Taken unawares, Cicely showed her deep surprise.

"By her first marriage, of course. But tell me your

address and I can let you know when I have some new models."

Madame Vivienne quickly produced a gold pencil and silk-covered pad. As she took down the name and address, she searched her mind. The name was familiar. Of course—she remembered now. Enid had told her about an heiress in the village where Ernest lived. What luck—she could charge up to the hilt.

The Patou model in all its perfect shapeliness was brought in by Tinette and bought by Cicely. The atmosphere grew more friendly—even Anne began to chat and look interested in a sheer white evening-frock, backless and sophisticated, which was next displayed. She, too, came under the spell of this large woman with her strong face, deep compelling eyes and slim white hands on which huge diamonds flashed—the only sign of femininity about her tailored figure.

Mrs. Rushlip, in the meantime, had disappeared, but returned an hour later to find the two still seated in Madame Vivienne's salon, still engrossed. Now she deliberately walked over to them and demanded an introduction.

Cicely looked coldly at the work of art which was Mrs. Rushlip's face, and returned her greeting aloofly, but Anne, scenting possible adventure, was unexpectedly cordial. There was no accounting for Anne, Cicely thought, not for the first time. She smiled her sweetest smile, admired the emerald-studded cigarette-case which was produced, sympathized with the tendency to rheumatism, listened to the list of brine and salted baths indulged in by the poor victim, until Mrs. Rushlip, overcome by the charm of this young thing, took her address and telephone number and invited her to a

cocktail party. On being told there was a brother, he also was asked.

When, at last, Cicely and Anne were crawling up Bond Street, six frocks and several hats in discreet silver cardboard boxes in the back of the car, Cicely said : " Well—satisfied ? "

Anne, her face animated, answered : " Yes, rather. I'm just beginning to enjoy myself."

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The next afternoon Miles Crispin called. Cicely was alone in her drawing-room except for Amber, who lay at her feet. In her lap was a novel, unopened, while she lay with half-closed eyes on the divan and peeped with satisfaction at her softly painted walls, which had a hint of sea-green in them, and the silk curtains, faintly gold, and the exquisitely symmetrical Queen Anne walnut chest-of-drawers on which she had just put a huge bowl of limpid yellow roses. Lovely languor—life was good. Anne and Colin were on the little Hampstead golf course going through the torments of learning to play. One day she would have to start. It had been a sudden idea of Anne's—this taking up of golf—and now she supposed she must find out about being elected. Difficult when you knew nobody to put you up. Of course, they could go on paying green fees. Unpleasant, though, to have no standing—strange and queer, after village life, this knowing nobody, nobody knowing about you. She wondered vaguely how Jim was getting on at the hospital and thought of her mother pottering in the garden, and was again assailed with a delicious feeling of escape. After all, she would make friends here all in good time—it was wonderful to be free.

And then Miles Crispin was announced. She sat up and blinked her brown lashes and for one second wondered where she had heard the name before. Then, blushing with confusion, she rose to the situation, to the accompaniment of his extraordinarily charming voice, which remained always to her his chief attraction.

"Have I disturbed your rest? I am so sorry." He held her hand in his big one and there was a quality of real distress in his manner as he looked down at her with concern in his small blue eyes, under broad eyebrows. "But I felt I must call and see you. You see, the whole thing is so intriguing—you and my father's money."

He smiled gently at her awkward: "Oh, I'm glad you called. I was going to ask you to come and see me—us."

"May I sit down?" He stooped to make friends with Amber, who snuffed at his hand with appreciation.

"Oh—please. And won't you have a cigarette?"

She watched him lower his large, well-built frame, already showing signs of a slight corpulency, into a green and gold chair. No sooner had he manipulated his long legs, when he blurted out: "Oh, lord. I'm sorry—do you mind—I don't think I'd really better settle in this one—I might break it." He looked round helplessly for something more sturdy, and Cicely, suddenly at her ease, all strain released, laughed. He was human.

With some difficulty he got out of the chair and towered above her.

"Well, that's all right. It made you laugh, at any rate." She noticed his waistcoat required pulling into place after his exertion, but it remained ruckled to the end of his visit. His clothes were obviously good and well-tailored, his tie chosen with care, but somehow the

whole had the effect of looking a little untidy. The forehead was broad and shrewd beneath the fine brown hair. A small moustache hid a mobile soft mouth, which admitted a liking for the good things of life.

"I'll stand," he said firmly now. "Tell me, how does it feel to be rich? I must say you look very well under it."

Just as if he had known one all his life, though Cicely, just as if I hadn't to get all his money, just as if he really liked me and was really and truly interested. What should she say?

Then he said: "It must be nice and very good for you, to be able to buy all the clothes you want. Every pretty woman ought to have enough money to do that."

Disarmed, she laughed again.

"Don't think of me as a guilty conscience," he told her now, with a smile. "My father did what he thought was right and we must make the best of it." He looked thoughtfully round the room. "Your choice?"

She nodded. "Do you like it?"

"It suits you," he said frankly, and stared at her. She had the feeling that he already knew a great deal about her and wondered if he would talk about himself, but was too shy to ask questions.

"You may miss the country later on," he said now. "But, of course, new toys are such fun. You're enjoying it all?"

She nodded again, not daring to talk before she knew her ground, preferring that he should take the lead.

"That's right. Is your husband in?"

Jim—she'd forgotten all about him.

"No—not now. He's at the hospital. He's started some research work, you know. He's always been keen

on it and Mr. Crispin seemed to wish him to have enough funds to carry it out. He works all day," her voice took on a decided tone. She wished so much to emphasize the fact that the money wasn't being wasted. She must make him realize that she was aware of her responsibility. She didn't recognize her own strong desire to justify herself, to make a good impression on him—a good personal impression—as she began to quote Jim: "He's not quite sure what line to take, but he's inclined to make tests with carotin and its curative effect on tuberculosis and asthma. Carotin, you know, is an extract from carrots. You only get one grain from a whole hundredweight of carrots, so you see, it's a slow process."

"It must be." The lips under the moustache twitched dangerously. "I see you are an enthusiast."

Cicely recovered herself and her poise at his tone.

"No," she told him with dignity. "Not really. I don't know anything about it. I hate laboratories, but it's Jim's work and he likes it."

He scrutinized her gravely. "Do you know, you're being yourself for the first time since I came into this room."

"Am I?" His flattering attention to herself and her motives was at last having its effect. Few women, as she was to learn later, could resist it.

"Yes—and I like it. Tell me, what do you do with yourself all day?"

"Well—I've been very busy with the flat, you know—arranging it. My brother and sister are living with me. Of course, we don't know many people—yet; so it's a bit dull for them. They want to join the golf club. We are trying to find someone to put us up for membership."

Promptly he took out a notebook.

"Yes. Of course. Naturally. I think I can help you there."

He made an entry and put away the book in his pocket.

"Well, I must be going. I just looked in on my way. Mr. Hunt gave me your address. I'm due back in my chambers at four."

"Chambers?"

"Yes, I'm a barrister—only a moderately successful one—but busy. Now, let me see, can you dine with me one night?"

The little book came out again.

"I'd love to." Cicely's spirits rose.

The leaves fluttered over and over.

"I'm afraid this week's no good. Friday of next week? Can you manage that?"

Cicely thought of her queue of empty evenings and fastened joyfully on this landmark. She wondered how all those other evenings were filled up for him. What did men in London do with their evenings?

"That's splendid. The Savoy Grill at eight o'clock then, on Friday week." He paused. "What about your husband? Would he like to join us?"

"I can't answer for him," Cicely replied evenly.

"No—I see. Well, perhaps you will come by yourself this time and I may have the opportunity of meeting him later."

Cicely summoned her wits. "Will you come and have dinner here with us?"

"I'd like to. Shall we fix it now?" he said promptly. They settled a date two weeks hence with the aid of the little book, and he took her hand again in his big, rather soft one, stared at her and went out of the room.

"I can see myself out," he said briskly as he went. Cicely dropped back on to the divan. There was nothing to show that he had been there except a tiny heap of cigarette ash on the carpet where he had stood. Friday week—Friday week. Then she fetched the telephone directory and looked up his address. For her a new era had begun.

VI

JIM was dubious about the cultivation of Miles Crispin's acquaintance. Cicely told him over dinner, having just broken the news to Anne in her bedroom. Anne was appropriately surprised and excited.

"But what a thrill, Cicely. It's a lovely situation. P'raps he'll fall for you and then you will want to give the money back or something, all for love's sake."

Cicely crimsoned and hastily slipped her dress over her head to hide her face. She insisted on changing for dinner, and Colin, who complained bitterly, was forced to put on a dinner-jacket.

"It only makes you feel festive," he told Anne. "And then there's nothing to be festive about. I mean," he corrected himself, "I like walking on the Heath at dusk, and a boiled shirt spoils my appreciation. Besides, Cicely only does it for the sake of the maids."

"Well, Jim doesn't mind, so why should you?" Anne felt it was bad for Colin to have his way in everything, although she agreed with him in most matters. Now she stared at the enveloped Cicely, eyes wide with interest. As usual, her mind flashed ahead, alight with visions.

"What's he like?—how old?—clever or stupid? What's he do—does he attract you?"

Cicely turned to the glass-topped, low dressing-table and combed her hair in leisurely fashion. Somehow it

seemed impertinence, discussing him like this. She answered crossly :

"Oh, do be quiet, Anne. I don't know anything about him. He was only here a little while. He certainly looked rather important. It's so silly talking about being attracted—there's nothing about him like that. He struck me as a busy man of the world, you know, very quick and shrewd and booked up with engagements."

The hint of reverence in her voice did not escape Anne, who knew a good deal about hero or heroine worship at school. Cicely was an absolute child in such matters.

Jim, when Cicely told him with a studied casualness, looked thoughtful; and Colin, glancing up from his salmon and catching Anne's lively eyes, winked.

"What can his motive be?" Jim asked in a worried tone. "It seems rather bad form to me under the circumstances. You'd think he'd wait until he was asked. Unless he's spying out the land—I mean looking round to see how his father's money is being spent."

"But he's not that kind of man, I'm sure," Cicely argued. "You'll be able to see for yourself when he comes to dinner a fortnight to-day."

"Dinner—here?"

"Yes, he wants to meet you, and Anne, and Colin."

Jim looked at Cicely through his horn-rimmed spectacles, moved his lips as if to speak, reconsidered the idea, and wore an expression of perplexity on his thin face for the rest of an uneasy evening. Uneasy, because the three found themselves wishing Jim would utter his thoughts, whatever they were. It was not that he sulked

or even seemed hurt, but it was rather like sitting in front of a film-screen waiting for the performance to begin and nothing happening, Cicely thought.

Soon he retired to his laboratory, which he was in the throes of arranging, leaving the three to drink their coffee in the drawing-room. Cicely gazed out of the window. A shower of heavy rain had just fallen. Roses with gritty faces clung damply to their bushes. The heath, which extended beyond the low garden wall, exuded an earthy smell. Aged trees, their leaves loaded with heavy moisture, stood mute and still. Her thoughts turned again to Miles Crispin, until Colin shattered them with his soft voice.

"Perhaps old Jim is right. It might be rather awkward—having him to dinner, I mean."

Always a pacifist, Colin, except with himself. He urged on his frail body with his strong spirit to untold exertions, but found it intolerable to bear other people's frictions. To-night he looked tired and drawn—his straight red hair clung to his head, his thin hands turned over the leaves of a book rapidly.

Unhesitatingly, in a far-off voice, Cicely said: "It's all arranged now. Of course he's coming."

There was a silence. Then Colin said: "Well, I think I'll go and see if I can give Jim a hand. I can't think how he's going to squeeze all his bits and pieces into the lab. That new incubator takes up most of the room."

Anne said: "You'll soon get booted out. He won't have you in. He says it's bad for you."

"Someone ought to help him," Colin answered meaningly, and as usual Anne rose to the occasion.

"Oh, all right, I s'pose I'd better."

"Beastly places, labs," Cicely said from the window. "I hate going near them."

"I can't say I adore them," Anne said, and went out of the room.

The laboratory had once been a large bathroom. Now, with a bench and let-in basin, cupboards and paraphernalia of glass and bottles, it seemed cramped and restricted. Jim's long body, wrapped in a white coat, bent itself over a box of hypodermic syringe needles. He appeared to be sorting them. He didn't even look up when Anne went in, but muttered:

"I say—do these for me, Anne. Take out the old ones and leave the new."

"Right." Without speaking, she set to work.

"Ghastly business, this," Jim said at last, "starting all over again."

Moodily he pushed away a packing case. Anne was used to his blunt remarks and brusque manners when alone with him. Cicely was the only being in the world whom he favoured with gentle politeness and explanations, but she was quite unconscious of her favours.

"But," began Anne, and then a wave of pity overcame her. Poor old Jim—how he hated this life. Yet why go on with it if it was against all his instincts? She pored over the needles. She said: "Yes. It must be. Have you decided what line you are going to take up?"

"More or less." The answer was curt. Anne, feeling squashed and small, stayed silent. Presently a hand came on her shoulder, and his voice asked her what she had been doing to-day.

"Amusing myself, as usual."

"Did you see this man Crispin?"

"No, Colin and I were trying to play golf."

Jim's lips curled. "You call that amusement?"

"Well, it's meant to be—perhaps one day it will be." She laughed and showed her even teeth. "You ought to take it up again, Jim. You used to be good, didn't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I shall, one day. As a time-killer it's excellent."

"But you might say that about all games," Anne argued desperately.

"I don't know—with other games you're pitting your brains and strength against another person's. Golf is so slow and individual. You play it by yourself and with yourself. It doesn't train you to keep alive and active. Though it does, I suppose, train you to rely on your own efforts, and that helps certainly."

How seriously he took everything, thought Anne. Always some motive underlying all he took up. Why had Cicely married him? The answer came swiftly. Because he was the first young man to ask her to marry him, and because she knew no one else. It was impossible to imagine Jim as a care-free student, ever. She watched his precise movements. Dull—worthy and nice. Oh, so different from Ernest. Ernest—so quick to grasp your thoughts, so vital even if he was much older than she . . . Oh God, she mustn't think of him. Push him away—away. She counted again. Eighteen years older. Did it matter so much when you loved someone? Here she was thinking of herself when she had come to help Jim. She remarked:

"It's awfully funny, really, when you come to think of it. Miles Crispin is not in the least what Cicely and I thought he would be like. Cicely says he is prosperous

and worldly. Perhaps he doesn't care tuppence about the money. Perhaps the old solicitor man piled it on."

"I don't want him here, anyway," Jim snapped. "I shan't be in. I'm not going to be questioned about my work. The whole position is intolerable. I don't want to be involved in a discussion on anti-vivisection."

At last, thought Anne, he's talking like a human being, instead of boxing himself up. Then he added irrelevantly :

"And you, Anne, you ought to take up something that will make you work your brain—you've got one. Golf," he blinked behind his glasses, "is no good to you. I thought there was an idea of going to an art school? You—and Colin, too, when he's cured—you must learn to be good citizens, not rich parasites. Colin, of course, will be going to Switzerland soon."

"Soon?"

"Of course. That's the idea, isn't it? I've written to the sanatorium."

"But, Jim . . ." She paused. "Jim, wouldn't it do if he went in the winter? I mean, it's warm here now—I thought . . ."

"You think you want him to enjoy himself. It will be nice to have him to take you and Cicely about, as I'm no good—too busy. Don't you realize that the boy is not fit, Anne? You have no conception of the harm it may do him if he drinks too much or has too many late nights."

He was working himself up at last into a quiet anger. Jim couldn't be really angry—at least, he was not capable of anger with any ginger or spice in it.

"He doesn't want to go yet," she said stubbornly. The thought of being without Colin now was awful,

and after all he had done without Switzerland all this time—surely he could wait a little longer. Jim was being just perverse and cross.

“What he wants is of no account. He must think of his health.”

“Is he very ill, Jim?” she asked directly. “I mean, is it a question of life or death?”

“No—not exactly. The old lesion has healed up, but you never know when it might break out again. It’s no use playing about.” He spoke impatiently. “Playing about and drifting. I think he feels it himself. Switzerland wouldn’t do any harm—it would certainly do good. He’d have a complete rest. Cicely ought to tell him to go. I can’t do anything more, I can only advise. I keep an eye on him, of course, and his weight’s all right.”

The subject was dropped, and for the next hour Anne counted and packed away test tubes and glass plates, checked stains and chemicals, using every scrap of space to the best advantage, till eleven o’clock struck. Jim straightened his long back and seemed more cheerful.

“Time for you to go to bed,” he remarked. “I shall work on a bit. Tell Cicely I’ll sleep in the dressing-room. I don’t want to disturb her.”

When she reached the door, his voice made her pause. “Thanks for your help, Anne. Sleep well, and don’t think. Regrets are just silly at your age, and you’ve got everything before you.”

She shut the door softly. Dear old Jim, sweet of him. Perhaps after all he understood more than one thought. Doctors were supposed to understand a lot without being told, though you couldn’t actually call a bacteriologist

an ordinary doctor. Not much humanity about germs. Anne smiled to herself.

She went to Cicely's room to give her Jim's message. When she heard it, Cicely said :

"Is Jim still cross?"

"A bit, I think."

"About Miles Crispin?"

"Yes—no—I say," Anne suddenly saw herself as a kind of liaison officer between Jim and Cicely. She didn't want to be a tactful intermediary, she wouldn't be used. She hated subterfuge and half tones. "I say, Cicely, why don't you ask him yourself—talk it all over with him? Much better, you know."

Cicely said, rather forlornly : "How can I, when he's going to sleep in the dressing-room? He'll be gone in the morning to the hospital before I've had my breakfast. Anyway," she snuggled into her pillows, "it's no use talking to Jim. He's got his ideas cut and dried and nothing will alter them. I shall do what I think. Besides, everything takes such a lot of explaining, he never sees one's point."

Anne demanded : "Does he often sleep in the dressing-room?"

"No, it's the first time." Cicely actually blushed. "But I had a bed put there purposely."

Anne sat down promptly at the foot of the bed. "Well, I think it's a pity," she said seriously. "I know people think it's stuffy—sleeping in the same room, I mean. But a girl told me at school that her married sister was quite sure that to be happy, really happy, you must sleep in the same room. If you'd quarrelled during the day, it was easier to make it up in the dark, and if you had any great trouble it's simpler to confide and

share it with a person you knew you're going to be more or less shut up with for eight hours."

"What a funny way to put it." Cicely laughed a trifle uneasily. She lay with her fair hair against a green pillow, lovely and serene and untroubled. "But you don't really know much about it, Anne. Jim goes to sleep directly his head touches the pillow, and he'd be terribly grumpy if I woke him to pour out my young heart to him. And if he's by any chance awake and I know anything's worrying him, I try to keep my eyes open till he feels like telling me. But he's usually so long about it, I go to sleep in the meantime. I know it all sounds dull and prosaic—but then married life is, you know."

"I wonder," said Anne, and went off to bed.

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The cocktail party was in full swing. Round the bar at the end of the ballroom clustered the young people. The more elderly, a trifle doubtful about the staying power of their legs when under the influence of the insidious mixtures in crystal glasses which the footmen were busily distributing, reclined in deep cushioned chairs and divans around the room. They felt safer that way. The noise was terrific. Now and again a shrill hoot of laughter broke above the hot din.

Anne, after drinking two White Ladies in rapid succession, felt and was aware of a prickly sensation down her spine. The cheeks and lips of the girls around her, which to her unaccustomed eyes had seemed on her arrival to be much too highly coloured and artificial, now appeared normal and lovely. She made a surreptitious dive into her new bag and hurriedly smeared her own

lips with a fresh coat of orange and dabbed some more colour on her cheeks. That was better. She didn't look so odd—out of it. She faced the company with renewed courage and looked round for Colin. He was talking animatedly to a tall, powerful young man. His cheeks were flushed, his red hair shone—he was evidently enjoying himself vastly. Now he caught her eye and came over to her. The young man followed.

"I say, Anne, I'm going to be taken up for a flight—to-morrow probably. Oh, I'd forgotten—my sister—Peter."

"How-do," said the young man casually, "have another drink?"

"I've had two," Anne said doubtfully, and was conscious of a sharp glance directed by the young man. He had long, straight, flaxen hair, dull blue eyes, rather a large flat face. She noted that his grey suit was well cut, his tie carefully matched; one hand was deep in his trouser pocket. He gave an effect of indolence.

"Two? After your sixth you can begin to talk."

"You'll like that, Colin," said Anne, and took another White Lady from a handy tray.

"Rather. I'm to be at Heston at eleven, so you'll have to play golf by yourself, unless Cicely . . ."

The young man's eyes strayed. He looked bored. Suddenly his dull glance met Anne's eyes.

"Why don't you come? Can if you like."

She quelled her ready enthusiastic acceptance, and met his indifference with equal casualness.

"Thanks—I'll see what time I've got in the morning."

Colin was amazed—he knew how keen she was to fly. Then he grinned. Anne was clever—she had the knack of adapting herself.

"Your brother can bring you," said the young man named Peter.

"No, I'll drive myself in case I want to do something afterwards."

"What breed of car?"

"Rolls," she said shortly, hoping Cicely wouldn't want it. Now she began to feel elated. She liked Peter. He was not too easy, so different from the dark, gigolo-like young man who had snapped her up the moment she came into the room and asked her where and how she lived, where she bought her clothes, said how lovely she was, and touched her bare arm with a soft, flabby hand. She thought he was about to ask how much money she had, when, at a wave of the hand from Mrs. Rushlip, he melted away.

"Bloody party," Peter next remarked. "Old Rushlip a friend of yours?"

"I scarcely know her really, but I think she's rather a dear," Anne remarked.

"She's a good collector of people, and she's as cute as hell." Again he lapsed into boredom and gazed around him. Anne was suddenly aware of someone saying, "Oh, there's Enid Faulkner. I simply must go and talk to her—I owe her thousands and thousands for decorating my house. She's a devil when she's roused."

Anne watched the speaker approach—a tall, dark woman with an incredibly slim figure. Nails to match her lips, her body moulded by her black dress—she was very attractive and remarkably handsome. Anne began to doubt the suitability of her own dress, to question the cut and taste of it. Later, she found she was not alone in this. Enid Faulkner had that effect on most women.

So this was Ernest's wife. This was the woman he had once loved.

Peter's voice cut in on her thoughts. "Why haven't I met you two before?"

It was Colin who said: "Because we've been buried alive in the country."

"Really? All the time?"

For the first time Peter smiled, and Anne found it an extremely pleasant affair—Peter's smile. It crumpled up his eyes, it exposed his white teeth, it made one feel happy.

"It's quite true," interposed Anne, and she smiled too and felt happy.

The babel increased. It swelled to the top of the looking-glass roof. Girls and men began to lean towards each other. Like a wind sweeping through heads of corn Anne thought. A curious excitement had her in its grip. This was life at last—heady and thrilling. It took one out of oneself—made one forget to think. Nothing like this at home. Yet she was glad Cicely was not there. She wouldn't belong somehow.

People who had been on the verge of going now drifted back from the doors and settled to drinking more cocktails. A girl floated up. She was very young, very sure of herself, had lots of make-up on her tender skin, and she was rather drunk.

"Hullo, Peterkins—wondered if you'd come to this foul party. I dashed away from the Steins to come here—that was pretty bloodsome, too. Everyone over a hundred, but rich and useful. Well—won't you have me know your friends?"

Peter waved an elegant white hand.

"Anne and Colin—Audrey," he said wearily.

"What's the matter, darling?" Audrey asked Peter.

"What's rattling you? You cross with Audrey? About last night? You needn't be. I've always told you I wasn't a high-flyer, now haven't I? P'raps you'll believe it now."

"Oh, shut up," said Peter. "You'd better have another drink and then you'll go to sleep and be quiet."

Anne was curious to see what effect rudeness had on the girl. But she didn't seem to care. She blinked her enormous eyes once and answered sweetly :

"Why not try another lovely? For instance, Harmony—she's mad about you—in case you don't know."

"Who cares?" asked Peter irrelevantly.

"Well, we're going to the 'Pink Bus.' Coming?" asked Audrey. She looked at Peter, ignoring Anne and Colin. Peter's grunt conveyed neither refusal nor assent, so Audrey moved away.

Anne began to feel shy and out of her depth. Colin smiled encouragingly. Mrs. Rushlip advanced on them and took Anne's arm.

"Come along, my dear. There are lots of people dying to know you."

She was hustled into a group of young men and girls who certainly did not give the impression of early demise on her account. After one brief, scrutinising acknowledgment, they returned to their monosyllabic conversations with each other. The chief topic for concern appeared to be what they were going to do to-night, to-morrow, and the day after. Motor-racing was mentioned: a bathing party—planned to take place in a private pool belonging to someone whom nobody knew—was suggested; this, however, was no serious deterrent. Someone voted for a game of darts.

"Do you play tennis?" Anne asked a young man, thinking she should say something.

He answered rudely: "I am an artist. Do you?"

Anne's thoughts went back to the tennis parties at home, where she had been considered "quite good." They entailed a couple of sets before tea on a bad grass court, iced lemonade, a chat under the trees, and perhaps an ice; then another set, and home on her bicycle.

"Yes," she said, "I do play."

"Wimbledon form?"

At first she thought he was joking, but seeing that his heavy dark face remained perfectly serious, she answered gravely:

"No, hardly."

"What club?" He was merciless.

"I don't belong anywhere—yet."

He half turned away. "Everyone who plays is so damned good nowadays," he remarked heavily, and Anne, feeling small and snubbed, made up her mind to join a club at once and work hard at the game till she was good at it. As he remained at her side, she ventured:

"What kind of artist are you?"

He became more alert. "I design for the films. We had a première last night. Did you go? At the 'Crown.' Not bad really—quite well received by the critics. Not that they know the first thing about them."

"No, I wasn't there. But it must be exciting to see your work for the first time," Anne said sympathetically.

"The first time? Not exactly. I see the thing hundreds of times before. I say," he veered round and stared straight at her, "have you ever heard anyone say to an author, 'How clever you are; I can't think how you know what to say. How do you think of plots?'"

"No—why?"

"I just wondered," he answered with a crooked smile. Anne bristled.

"I don't know any authors," she said suddenly, "or artists. If I did I shouldn't ask them their methods, any more than I should ask a plumber how he mends pipes. I don't think they're interesting enough. After all, it's their job of work, and it's up to them to do it properly."

"That's nonsense," he answered, crossly now. He arranged his red tie, holding the collar of his dark green shirt in place. "Creative work can't be learnt like—er—plumbing. You can learn the technique, but ideas—well, they're entirely individual. Anyway, if you don't know any artists, you don't know what you're talking about."

"I do know one," Anne said slowly. "Ernest Faulkner."

"Do you know him well?"

"Yes."

He said, "I would like to meet him," and for the first time became polite.

Anne mustered her forces. She said with dignity: "I will see if it can be arranged. What is your name?"

Now he looked blankly astonished. "My name is Cedric Cardew."

At that moment Anne was aware of Peter standing near.

"Really, my dear Anne," he drawled, "even if you have been buried alive, I should have thought Cardew's name would have re-echoed through your grave. What's your publicity man doing, Cedric? Gross neglect, I call it."

"Where is your particular graveyard?" Cardew asked Anne seriously. She told him the exact position of

Barfield, and watched him take out a pencil and enter it into a little book. Now her interview with the mighty was evidently finished. An ugly but attractive woman, dressed from head to foot in sage green, put her green-sleeved arms, exuding a strange scent of wet grass, round the artist's neck and kissed him lovingly on both cheeks.

"Darling, wasn't the première too, too wonder-voll? Wasn't I marvellous—weren't you marvellous?"

The room grew hazy with smoke. Voices articulated with difficulty. It was hot. A gramophone, of beautiful tone, crooned and chanted. Anne's world was blurred. Colin's face swam before her.

"I think we ought to go."

A tall willowy figure in black rocked on her horizon. "Is this Anne? My dear, I want to meet you. I hear you know that difficult husband of mine. So sorry your sister isn't here. I want you and your brother to join my little party. We are going on to the 'Pink Bus.'"

Anne, battling hard with her inside, which seemed determined to resist her efforts to restrain it, thought bitterly that this was not in the least the way in which she meant to greet Ernest's wife. Yet involuntarily she murmured:

"Thank you, but I feel rather—rather——"

"Come along, my dear."

Without fuss, without bother, a firm hand directed her to the fresh air. The same hand produced *sal volatile*, while a red smile encouraged her.

"That's all right—so hot. It affects lots of people like that. Now come along and join the others. I've heard such a lot about you."

"Who from?" Anne asked incredulously.

"Why, poor Ernest, of course," was the bland answer.

Anne, conscious of a weight like stone somewhere in the region of her heart, followed Enid Faulkner.

"Oh, Colin," she whispered at the door, "do you think we ought to go?"

"Get in," shouted Peter from the road. He sat at the wheel of an enormous panting silver car so low on the ground that it almost touched it. A girl sat beside him, her arm round his shoulders. Anne was pushed from behind. She fell into the girl's lap, Colin fell on top of her.

"Please, I'm Harmony," lisped the girl, who seemed as soft and as pink as an ice cream.

"And that's Anne," rasped Peter as they shot away.

"Please, I'm Colin," said Colin. Then, "I say, what a wizard car!"

"A cad's car really," said Peter. "All show and no go in her."

"Darling, how appropriate," Harmony whispered.

"Shut up," said Peter.

"I wonder when he'll say that to me," thought Anne.

The 'Pink Bus'—glitter, pink and gold. Hot smell of kippers—coffee—smoke. Lager beer, amber in spiral glasses. Girls in suits and berets—girls in flimsy dresses—girls in hats. All alluring; prettily waved hair—lips, orange, carmine, rose—yes, one was so aware of lips and finger-nails.

Enid Faulkner and Mrs. Rushlip talking and looking at her and Colin, and smiling secretly. Dancing with young men, some already going bald. She found she danced well. They hardly spoke, just pressed her with their arms, compelling her to follow their rhythm.

Had they any background? Nothing to show what

they were. Had they mothers, sisters, houses, flats, jobs? They gave nothing away. Surface—must be on the surface. Bad form to probe, ask questions. Live in the present.

Harmony by her side drinking lager through a straw.

"Little me's got to be on the set at eight to-morrow."

"Set?"

"Yes—we're making 'Lone Love.'"

"A film?"

"'Course, darling."

"Oh." Then, "Does Audrey do anything?"

"Audrey? Oh, yes. She's in Jenkins & Glover. Jumper department. Lucky. Lots and lots of commission. You can't buy a jumper there under four guineas."

"Is it difficult to get a job at Jenkins & Glover?"

"Dweadfully—darling. Didn't you know? Unless you're a golf champion or tennis star or welation to a film or stage star—any sort of welation," she added meaningly.

"Do you have to be clever?" Anne persisted.

"Bwains, you mean? Bwains are so bowing, aren't they? So dull-making. 'Course you must have publicity and push and pwettiness—it doesn't matter what sort of publicity," she added naively. "Anything will do—divorce, a nice motor accident in peculiar circumstances, night-club raid, not turning up at your wedding to a baronet's son—anything like that. But, darling, are you twying to get a job?"

"No," Anne said. "I don't think they would take me. I'm just ordinary."

"Oh, no, darling." Harmony gave a little squeak of protest. "You're sweet. Weally you are. I just

wondered if you were getting Peter to help you to get one," she said after a pause. "You seem to be hanging round a weeny bit."

Anne began to have respect for Harmony's unacknowledged cleverness. All the same, she reddened and felt suddenly miserable.

"I only met Peter at the cocktail party," she protested. "And I haven't any axe to grind. Anyway, how could Peter help me?"

"Being an Honourable helps an awful lot, darling. People who own shops are so dweadfully snobbish. Peter's got lots of girl fwends."

"I see." But she must settle the matter once and for all. "I'm not looking for a job, neither is Colin," she said in a low voice. "We've got enough money."

"Gwacious!" Harmony's peek-a-boo eyes widened till they were at popping point. "Enough! It can't be possible. But, darling, you must give a party at once. Won't you?"

"Perhaps," said Anne. "I . . ."

But Harmony had disappeared, perhaps to spread the news. Then there was Enid Faulkner, cool and collected.

"So nice you could come." Her large, well-mascard eyes were lowered. "I want to meet your sister, too, dear."

There was a pause and Anne, feeling that something was demanded of her, said politely:

"I'm sure she would like to meet you."

"That's very nice. I will come and call. Let me see, what is your address?"

Anne, with some misgivings, gave it to her.

"What a pretty thing you are," Enid Faulkner went on in a low soothing voice. "And so clever with your

clothes. You'll have a lovely time in London. You must come and see me often. This autumn—I hope you will still be in town?—there is such a lot on. I'm giving a small evening party next week. Will you come?"

Anne and Colin crept to bed at three o'clock. Colin whispered, for fear of waking Cicely and Jim, "Don't forget to-morrow morning. Be early."

"Rather," said Anne. "I hope we fly high."

VII

CICELY arrived at the Savoy early. She felt guilty, upset and excited. For the first time she had deceived Jim, told him a deliberate lie. But then, of course, she had never had cause to hide anything from him before.

Again she reminded herself that it was all his fault, really. If he hadn't become such a mollusc, so silent and repressed about Miles Crispin, she would have told him about this dinner. As it was . . .

For the last few days her pleasure in her new life had been dimmed. She had been more concerned than she cared to admit when he didn't even come in to say "good night" after that time when Anne helped him in the laboratory. She felt lonely and miserable all night, as if some part of her were missing. Besides, a queer sense of fear was there. She wanted everyone to be happy, so much. Anne and Colin were. They were both so excited over the new friends they'd made. Just Jim stood outside like a spectator, aggressive in his silence, perturbing with his aloofness.

All very well for Anne to say she should come to grips with him. It was not possible. He would smile gently and go out of the room. Yet she knew he would disapprove of this meeting with Miles Crispin. He might even try to prevent it.

Still, not for one fraction of a second had she thought

of cancelling her engagement. She owed it to herself to live, to get what she could out of life. And—she wanted to dine with him.

"A concert, Jim. I'm going to a concert to-night. Will you be in to dinner? Anne and Colin will be out."

He didn't ask what concert, or when, or where. He just said he'd dine at the Club. So easy after all to lie and spare him any worry, so easy that it gave one an absurd sense of wrongdoing.

Anne and Colin were let into the secret. They had to be, of course. Colin felt she knew best how to manage her affairs, but Anne was more difficult. She stuck to her determination not to be an intermediary, but she hated deception.

"But Cicely, he wouldn't mind if you told him yourself; you're not a slave. All married women dine out. So much fuss about nothing. You're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"The circumstances are difficult," Cicely murmured, and obstinately clung to her point of view.

So here she was in her new Patou dress, discreet and well cut. Anne had said: "You look a perfect, charming English lady, even to the wild rose complexion." Inwardly she decided that her sister wouldn't fit in with Harmony and Audrey and Peter, and never would. She herself was out of her depths at the moment with them, but when she knew them better and got the hang of things, it would be different.

Cicely was aware she looked her best. And when Miles Crispin came through the door, she smiled into his eyes and for the rest of the evening was oblivious to all outside influences. Away from her home and responsibilities and background, she met this sympathetic,

attentive being in a world of comfort, good service, seductive food and wine.

To-night he looked younger. He told her she was lovely. She smiled and said :

"No, I'm just an English type."

"But so fresh, so . . . what shall I say . . . unspoiled. I expect you are inexperienced," he added meditatively. There was a teasing tone in his voice.

"In what way?" she demanded. Like most women, it was flattering to her to be thought different. She sunned herself in this pleasing atmosphere of being a success. He helped himself to caviare.

"Some day I'll tell you."

That spoke of future meetings, future friendship. As the meal wore on, she discovered he was a keen theatre-goer. He liked music, of a not too classical nature, he visited picture-galleries. She discovered, too, that her knowledge of current affairs to do with all these was appallingly small. Blushingly she apologized and reminded him she had been in the country for so long.

"But, my dear, I envy you. Think what a lot you have in front of you. I would give anything to be in your position. Inclination and the opportunity and the money to follow it up."

Suddenly the full force of their situation struck her. It was his money really—his heritage she was using. The liveliness which had kindled her serene eyes to brightness died. She looked worried, almost at weeping-point.

"What is it, what have I said?" he asked with concern. His keen blue eyes were troubled, his soft large hand enveloped hers as it lay on the table. When she did

not answer at once, he murmured, "Are you so sensitive, so easily hurt?"

She said now: "It's your money really, you know. That's the awful part of it. It hadn't really dawned on me till now that I've met you. You must hate me for coming in your way like this. It's all unfair of your father to leave it to me. It isn't as if it were just a few hundreds—but such a lot."

He had to lean forward to hear her low voice. Perhaps the champagne and the heat had made her uncontrolled, but certainly she was blurting out her present thoughts unheeding of their consequences. Her composure had disappeared. Nevertheless, her small outburst had swept away the subtle barrier between acquaintanceship and something more intimate. She had shown her naked feelings to a stranger and unconsciously she had provided a test.

If he had not been rather attracted by her, he would have called her "bad form" and "embarrassingly frank" and "gauche." As it was, her weakness appealed to him. The surface understanding and sympathy he extended to all women from that moment went a little deeper in her case. Inexperience was so fresh and intriguing.

A man came up, stopped by the table and said, in a low, pleasant voice:

"Congratulations, Crispin, on the Lewis case. You worked it up marvellously. It looked so black against you at first, never thought you'd win. It was a good effort."

A woman followed, grey-haired and charming. "Had to come across to remind you about to-morrow. Dinner at seven-thirty. The ballet starts at half-past eight. No

need to urge you to be punctual—you're the only busy man I know who always is ! We shall be a party of six."

Miles made the necessary introductions, and when they moved away, he said :

"Old friends of mine. He's just been knighted."

But the interlude gave Cicely time to pull herself together, to realize her childishness, to muster her forces. She was clever enough to realize that Miles Crispin evidently lived in a world of sophistication in which sentimentality was at a discount, personality at a premium. A world of competition and intellectual battles.

For a few seconds he had given his mind to his friends ; now he returned to her, all grave attention.

"Don't let's talk about that money," he said. "Naturally, I should have liked to have it. But I'd sooner you had it than anybody else. It will be an interesting experiment."

"What do you mean ?" she faltered.

"Well, watching the effects will be interesting. I am sure much more good will be done with it than if I controlled it."

"Mr. Hunt told me you had counted on it."

He smiled at her and unconsciously squared his shoulders.

"Yes, I had, and got lazy in consequence. Now I shall have to work much harder—good for me, probably."

"Why did you quarrel with your father?" she persisted.

"I didn't," he laughed now, pleasantly. "I never quarrel with anybody. He was a man with very set opinions, while I, perhaps, unfortunately, have an unhappy knack of seeing both sides of a question.

Perhaps my education was responsible for that. Anyway, I'm sure the old man wouldn't have made his thousands if he hadn't been a one-idea'd man—so there you are ! ”

“Are you such a keen anti-vivisectionist ? ”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Old Hunt has been talking too much ! ” he said. “No—I don't think I am. I'm very fond of animals. I think my father was rather inclined to be brutal and hard with them,” he smiled delightfully. “You can't wonder at it, after having dealt with sheep all his life, I suppose. But one night after dinner I took up the cudgels on their behalf, really to try to reduce his dogmatic ideas. He became heated and I suppose I goaded him on. You see, I haven't really much faith in human nature, but he had. With the result that he considered his money would be safer with a nice normal woman like you than with a queer fish like me. But there is one redeeming feature in the whole thing. I have met you through it.”

She glanced at the shrewd forehead and the teasing eyes beneath it. His fair hair had become a little untidy. She felt herself drawn to him irresistibly.

She blushed. “What a nice thing to say.”

And then she found herself telling him about her life at Weston, about her mother, about Anne and Colin. Under his guidance her descriptions became graphic. Unconsciously, she gave him a word-portrait of Jim.

“I am looking forward to meeting your husband next Wednesday.”

They had reached the coffee stage. It was half-past ten. They had been dining since eight o'clock.

Cicely was startled. If she told him Jim would not be there, he might refuse to come. It was an unbearable

thought. She was looking forward to arranging the dinner. She wanted to show off her possessions and her good taste.

She said quickly: "Yes—we are expecting you."

The bill was brought and paid.

"I must be going," she said lamely.

"I'll take you back," he said.

Alone in the intimate soft darkness of the taxi, Cicely felt shy. The night was warm, the air like velvet. The electric signs of Piccadilly winked unceasingly, alive, alert; buses, moving islands of light, slid contemptuously along on the smooth roads. The lights picked out women in evening frocks strolling hatless and cloakless from one place of amusement to another. They looked fairy-like and frail against the dark background of pavement. They aroused a thought in Cicely's mind and she said suddenly:

"I suppose you know lots of people."

Now that he was soon going out of her sight and would be swallowed up in the unknown, she realized how little she knew of him.

"Yes, a good many." His voice sounded amused in the darkness.

She stayed silent, ashamed of her direct question. The bald words re-echoed through her mind. She must remember to be more smooth—subtle. He sat beside her, large and strong and remote. He smoked a cigarette. She watched the lighted tip in its slow, deliberate progress from the region of lip to knee. All at once it died a sudden death on the floor, squashed by his foot. His shirt-front glimmered whitely, as he moved sideways. He took her hand and, raising it, pressed his lips on it. She could feel the short bristles of his moustache. Her

heart leapt in a queer excitement. His hair smelled faintly of lavender. She waited, tremulous, expectant. He put her hand back on her lap gently.

"You're a nice thing," he said softly.

She didn't know what to say, didn't know how to play up. She just sat there smiling into the darkness till the taxi stopped. Gathering up her skirts, she murmured now politely :

"Thank you for my nice evening."

"Thank you," he returned. "If you don't mind, I'll take the taxi straight back. Have you got your key?"

She had. She slid it into the lock. She slipped into the lighted hall and stayed listening to the jug-jugging of the taxi before she moved on to her bedroom. Amber was there. She got up and greeted her, then lay down beside the bed.

There Cicely sat in the dark room on the window-seat staring out at the heath, her mind and thoughts still in the taxi beside him. But she couldn't follow it for long. Where was he now? Was he in love with some woman?—the woman he hadn't married, the one Mr. Hunt had spoken of? "You're a nice thing—a nice thing." How much, how little did that mean? She turned on the light and examined herself critically in the long glass. Had she really looked her best? She wasn't sure now. Her hair was a little untidy, she looked tired. Perhaps he hadn't noticed, she hoped he hadn't.

At last she undressed slowly and crept into bed and lay thinking over their conversation, sentence for sentence. She turned out the light, hoping Jim would take the hint and not come in. She wouldn't miss him to-night; she wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

At half-past eleven the door opened and Jim came in. He had on a dinner-jacket, his clothes rustled as he moved. He did not switch on the light. He came and sat on her bed and reached for her hand.

"Tired, Snooks? The concert good?"

Concert? Her drowsy mind searched for a clue. Yes, of course—concert. Should she tell him about Miles? Now was the time—now or never. But it would mean so much discussion, the bringing to daylight of all they had talked of, minute explanations. What time she had gone, when she had left, what they had eaten, perhaps. Jim had a doctor's exactitude for small things. Then there would be suspicion. What was the fellow driving at?

"Very good," she murmured. "So tired."

He rustled again. "You were never so tired at home," he said grumblingly.

At home. Wasn't this home, then? Why couldn't he accept things?

"But I like being tired, I like doing things to make me tired, Jim dear."

"Yes. I see that." He lit a cigarette and stayed. She made a huge effort to rouse herself.

"Did you go to the Club?"

"Yes. I played some bridge. Everyone too good for me. My game's rusty." Then, "What a nice scent in here."

"Yes." She had bought a new scent, No. 6, for the occasion.

"You couldn't run to scent at home," he observed.

"But it's nice—I like it."

"Do you, darling?"

"Yes." He pressed her hand. She waited. "I say

Snooks, I've thought out a line of research to take. I spoke about it to Menzies to-day—he thinks it's quite a good thing. I'd like to do something about T.B. It's a tricky thing. Poor old Colin." He sighed in the darkness, heavily. "It'll mean using animal controls. Thought I might breed some at Barty. Shall need calves, guinea-pigs and rabbits. The calves are the snags—can't have them up here. Of course, I can get as many guinea-pigs and rabbits as I want at the hospital."

"Yes," said Cicely, "go on." She felt a trifle sick. Calves—warm, leggy, glossy brown, soft nozzles, healthy—made sick and ill. But for Colin's sake—mustn't forget—for people like Colin.

"I thought of trying a gold and copper thio-sulphate in combination." He was speaking patiently, talking down to her unmedical mind. Amber got up and stretched her long, silver-gilt body. Jim's free hand went out and stroked her head.

"Will it make the animals very ill?" Cicely asked.

"Well, one must look for kidney trouble, a comatose condition. Thought I might have some calves in the field behind the tennis-court, if you don't mind. Easily put up some sheds."

Mind? Barty was so far away—why should she mind?

"No—I don't mind."

"Good. I'm anxious to get started on this thing. You know"—he crossed one long leg over the other—"it's such a responsibility, the using of other people's money—making good with it."

"But, Jim, it's my money."

"In a way. Left to you for a purpose."

Oh, dear. Why couldn't he be lighthearted about it?

She was silent. He said at last: "Are the children back?"

"I don't know."

Colin is late, she thought anxiously, too late. Jim won't like it. But if he disapproved he did not voice his complaint.

"Would you like an aspirin?" he asked her now.

"No, thank you, Jim dear. I'll be all right."

He got up and looked down at her.

"Would you rather be alone?" he asked her gently.

"Well, is your bed in the dressing-room quite comfy?"

"Yes, perfectly." His voice was distant. She held out her arms. Against his shoulder she murmured:

"Jim dear, please, oh, please, understand. Don't be cross about anything. I hate to see you unhappy."

Her shoulder was patted. He kissed her hair. "I'm not unhappy. I'm all right. Don't worry, Snooks. Go to sleep."

He tucked her up, kissed her and went out of the room.

During the next few hours the whole of Cicely's relationship with Jim underwent a complete transition. She was not entirely aware of it herself. She only knew that she sat down to breakfast in the bright dining-room, a curious excitement tugging at her somewhere. Jim was obviously pleased to see her down to breakfast. He read the weather forecast, told her how nice her yellow jumper was, said he was short of brown socks and could Bennett mend some. Resolution radiated from him. He'll be happier now, she thought, now he's got some definite aim.

He said : " I think when I get this thing really going, I'll take in an assistant to work in the lab. here—privately. We can manage that, can't we ? "

" Yes, rather, Jim, of course we can. "

" I may run down to Barty and spend the night there to-night. I want to see about the sheds for the calves. "

" Right, darling. I shall be all right. "

" The children not down yet ; they were late, I expect. " He looked at her through his horn-rims and said beseechingly :

" Look after Colin, dear. He really mustn't do too much before he goes away. "

" 'Course I will. "

He kissed her and was gone. She helped herself to honey. The telephone bell buzzed.

" Hullo—yes ? " Even when she heard his voice she could hardly believe it. Her heart leapt when his words came over the wire.

" Is that you—Cicely ? "

Her Christian name !

" It's Crispin speaking. You remember those friends of mine you met last night—the Harveys ? Lady Harvey has just rung up—says one of the women has let her down for to-night—dinner and ballet. Wants to know if I'll bring someone in her place. I thought of you. . . . Can you manage such short notice ? Nice if you could. . . . So glad you can. . . . Awfully busy—would you mind picking me up at my flat at a quarter to seven ? . . . "

She put down the receiver and her thoughts flew to Jim. He might be away—no necessity to tell him then. And she was going to be admitted into the magic circle of Miles' friends. She sat down again and crunched her

toast with her strong white teeth, and stared at the bowl of roses on the table. Jim must be spared all worry now that he was working hard. He must not be disturbed by trifles. She thought of him now as someone far away. She saw revealed a man of sterling character, steady, reliable, doing his duty; compassionate for the sick, impatient of frivolity, treating life as a heritage of responsibility—not as a joyful wonderful gift. His interest in people began and finished with their physical welfare. To him poetry was poor stuff, only fit for hysterical women. The fascination of colour and form also passed him by. Music he loved, that of a formal, symmetrical pattern, appealing more to the intelligence than to the passions.

Cicely had been brought up to honour principles. Her father and mother were peace-loving, kind, respectable and respected. She had been taught to be sympathetic to the ill and aged, to give up things occasionally. She had learnt quickly that unselfishness gave one a glow of satisfaction, and at the age of twelve or thereabouts indulged in this pleasant sensation quite frequently, thereby earning for herself the reputation of being “such a sweet, unselfish child.” Religion had a definite place in her life. She went to church because she liked going and she was accustomed to it. It gave her a comfortable feeling to think she was being watched over, cared for and understood. She said her prayers night and morning, and gave up something for Lent every year. But between these times she thought little of her duty towards her Maker. She was not given to introspective morbid probings into her mind like some of the girls at school, where she had a name for being modest, self-reliant, quick-brained and fair. She was a good prefect.

Matters of sex left her cold. Jokes on the subject repelled her. Messy, nasty, beastly, she called them.

So it was not surprising that she now writhed in a horrible sense of guilt; and the more guilty she felt at her deliberate deception, the more she was convinced that she loved Jim, therefore must on no account hurt him. Instead of being a mate to quarrel and squabble and make it all up with, he subtly changed into a being who must at all costs be protected. She encased him in a shrine of tender respect, while she went excitedly into the arena, her hidden womanly powers and fascinations ready to skirmish with a new and thrilling experience.

While her thoughts were on the dress she would wear that night, Anne and Colin came in in their dressing-gowns. Anne looked tired. Her eyes were glassy and large. Colin walked with a jaunty step to hide his weariness. Anne helped herself to coffee and asked Cicely if "she had had a good time last night."

Good time—what did she mean by that? thought Cicely.

"We had a good dinner and pleasant talk," she answered rather primly.

"That all?" Anne said in a disappointed voice.

"In that case, I s'pose you told Jim all about it."

"What did you do?" Cicely hastily interposed.

"Us? We didn't have a good dinner or a pleasant talk, did we, Colin?"

She giggled slightly and pulled some bones out of a kipper.

"What did you do, then?" Cicely asked again.

"Well, we went to Brooklands to see Peter on the track, and then we went to Maidenhead to bathe and eat a sandwich, and then we had a row. It was Harmony,

really—she got so uppish.” She turned to Colin. “You didn’t help me out, either. Much too busy talking about flying. It’s rather funny, really, everybody thinks Colin and I are as rich as rich.”

She looked closely at Cicely’s face and decided she was not really paying attention. However, she went on :

“Old Vivienne wants us to buy more clothes. Harmony wants us to go to her store—she gets commission, you know. A man called Gregory offers Colin lots of free cigars—he’s told him they make him sick but he still persists—that’s because he wants Colin to buy lots from his firm. And then there’s Mrs. Faulkner—she’s dying to do your interior decorations all over again. People want us to be free guests at all sorts of clubs, so we’ll be members. Yes, we’re awfully popular, aren’t we, Colin ?”

“Still, it’s quite fun, isn’t it ?” said Colin.

“Mrs. Faulkner—Ernest’s wife—called when I was out,” Cicely said vaguely. “Do you want me to ask her ?”

“I? I don’t particularly care. She’s very nice to me. She wants me to like her son. Because I’m so rich, you see.”

Cicely at last realized that Anne was driving at something definite. She now understood that everything was not well with Anne. That hard, desperate look was in her eyes. Something’s happened, she thought, so soon.

“What is it ?” she asked, and was conscious of looks being interchanged between Anne and Colin.

Colin now observed, turning the subject : “You know between ourselves, Cicely, I do think this room is a little *passé*.” He kicked the polished mahogany table and grimaced at the eight chairs. “I should prefer un-

polished oak, you know, a Brangwyn design, and all that"—he waved to the serving-table—"all that should go. It looks like the pride of suburbia. And then the walls, so ordinary—you ought to see some real stuff. After all, you've got the dibs; you ought to spend it."

Something strange about Colin, too. He must really get away, she thought. Bewilderment seized her. Was it true about this room? She looked at Anne for guidance. Anne nodded gravely.

"He's quite right, you know. Such possibilities this flat has. Some of Enid Faulkner's designs are lovely."

"Do you like her?" Cicely asked with astonishment. Here was Anne taking her arch enemy—as she had chosen to think of her—placidly, accepting her. Perhaps after all her liking for Ernest Faulkner was only a phase, one that was passing. She watched her sister shrug her narrow shoulders. The vermilion wrapper suited her. Enid Faulkner's son—perhaps Anne liked him.

She said: "It doesn't matter if I like her or not. You have to put your feelings aside if you want a good time. But I'm dying to meet Miles Crispin. Have you thought what you're going to give him for dinner? Did you discover what he liked?"

"No," Cicely was serious. "No. Still, I'll ask him to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes, he's just rung up and asked me to join him at a dinner-party and ballet afterwards. Anne, do you think the white dress is all right?"

"Perfectly, darling," Anne answered evenly, and exchanged glances with Colin.

Formerly she would have plied Cicely with teasing

questions, but there was something about her this morning, a reserve, a kind of dignity, which stopped her.

"Will Jim be in?" she asked next, her back to the room while she poured out coffee.

"He's going down to Barty for the night," she answered with studied casualness.

"So he doesn't know you're going out," proffered Anne.

Cicely was busy collecting the remnants of letters and bills. "No. I . . . I didn't bother to tell him. He's very busy, you see. Got a new idea."

"Has he!" Colin looked interested. "That's fine. What is it, Cicely?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something he's going to test with. He'll want lots of animals—calves, too. That's why he's going to Barty, to arrange for the breeding."

"That would have pleased old Papa Crispin," observed Colin. "What disease is it for?"

"Tuberculosis," said Cicely, and stopped as she met Anne's anxious eyes.

"Oh," Colin helped himself to butter. "Well, he needn't think he'll experiment on me. I shall be fit by the time old Jim has worked out all that stuff."

"Of course," said Anne, "you will."

"He's got T.B. on the brain," remarked Colin cheerfully.

"Yes, that's what makes him so fussy about you," said Anne. "Silly, really. Why can't he try cancer or something else?" She wanted so much to reassure herself and him.

"He thinks T.B. is the greatest scourge there is," Colin said; "he told me so. He's jolly decent to me, old Jim is."

"He's decent to everybody," Anne remarked.

Cicely started to go out of the room. Anne and Colin, they made her feel uncomfortable this morning. After all, they were very young. How could they understand?

At the door she stopped at Anne's call :

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course." She turned and found them both confronting her. Anne's head was flung back. She hated asking favours. Colin hid his red head in the *Daily Sketch*.

"As you and Jim are going to be out to-night, couldn't we have a party here?"

She came back to the table and stood, her hands on the back of a Chippendale chair.

She said : "A party? What sort of party? And why because I'm going to be out?"

Anne grew red. Obligation—they were being humble to Cicely.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. But we've been asked out a lot, you know, and they all rather expect us to throw a party. We might come back here after dinner and have a few drinks and eats and dance to the wireless."

"But I'd like to be here, too."

"Well, you can be. Come in on the tail end," Colin said jauntily, "after your party. It's a good chance with Jim away; he hates noise."

"What kind of drinks?" Cicely asked doubtfully.

"We thought a few bottles of champagne," Anne said hastily. "We want to do it properly."

Champagne. How far they had travelled! Anne had only tasted it once at home on her mother's silver-wedding day. It brought back visions of her own wedding. She had thought it nasty sour stuff which went

up your nose the wrong way, but she had drunk it to please Jim. Always she had heard it spoken of as a thing of costly rarity. Now here were these two children asking for it as they might ask for ginger-beer or lemonade at a Christmas party. But it was within her power to give it to them. She could give or withhold. She saw this power as something tangible before her eyes and explored its possibilities carefully, exultantly, much as a *nouveau riche* examines an art treasure he has acquired and knows nothing about. It gave her importance.

"It's very expensive," she said, and laughed in a queer, triumphant fashion. "But I'll order some. And what do you want to eat?"

"Well, caviare sandwiches and some *foie gras* ones and little sausages. Can you run to that?" The question had a sting in it.

"I should think so."

As she went out of the room, Anne broke into laughter.

"How funny Anne is," thought Cicely as she went to the kitchen. "A bit hysterical."

Anne at last sat down quietly and gazed at Colin. "Well, that's that, anyway." She munched an apple and crossed her knees. "It's no use—ragging won't help now. She's gone beyond that stage. She's got us where she likes us."

She stopped eating and gazed at the round she had made in the apple. "Don't go away yet—to the sanatorium, I mean. It would be awful without you now, here."

He moved uneasily, refused to give a direct answer. "What do you mean by now?"

"Can't you see she's different? I can't help feeling sorry for Jim, but we can't do anything."

"No," said Colin at the window, "I suppose not." He took a deep breath and looked into the tree-spiked sky. "Oh lord, it would be good to be able to get a pilot's certificate. I wonder if Jim's idea will be a winner . . ."

"I don't see why it shouldn't," Anne said vaguely. She was thinking of Ernest and wondering if he had settled down to work in his studio. Ten o'clock clatter in the kitchen, the grandmother chair, window open, the herbaceous border, delphiniums, snapdragons. . . .

A queer unity exists between the members of some families which outsiders find it hard to understand. People hear them criticizing each other to each other and to other people; they squabble, find fault, and are thoroughly unpleasant in a way which one would think would make them enemies for life. Then miraculously all is well. There is no grand adjustment, apology, recrimination—they are just not at variance, they understand one another.

It was like that with Anne as she watched Cicely dress. Tact did not enter into her relations with her sister or a desire to coerce. When she told Colin it was hopeless to tease Cicely, she merely realized that it wouldn't cut any ice. Now she strongly disapproved of Cicely's methods: her way of tackling this first real problem she had had; her life was irritating. But as Cicely anxiously scrutinized her soft, fair head, her innocent-looking neck slightly tanned by the sun, and then her tall figure in the long glass, Anne understood.

Downstairs two dozen bottles of champagne stood on ice. Bennett was cutting sandwiches and helping cook to prepare *sauerkraut* to eat with the *wurstchen*—Peter's suggestion over the telephone. Colin had gone to buy new records for the gramophone. "We must have a noise before the dance music or wireless starts." Flowers everywhere. Yes, Cicely had been generous. There was an air of self-importance about her now as she moved round her room. She had almost demanded Anne's presence while she dressed, and Anne, the party in mind, did not refuse. She had a strong sense of fairness. But she objected to being bought.

Lounging critically in the low square armchair, she filed her nails, merely looking up occasionally when Cicely asked her a question. She realized only too well that big things have tiny beginnings; her small affair with Ernest had taught her that. It was not that she was disapproving of Cicely having what she termed a "crush" on Miles Crispin—it would do her a packet of good, perhaps. No, it was the discovery that Cicely could be secretive, and strong in her determination.

Cicely chatted in a desultory fashion. If she noticed Anne's ill-humour, she did not show it. At last she got up and said:

"All right?"

"You look like Amber," Anne said.

It was fun to see her self-importance crumble in the dust, to see doubt, like a dark shadow, envelop her, to see her anxiety radiate from her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that," Anne answered perversely, still wielding the file. "You look nice and soft and pretty and gentle like Amber. You've got that silver gilt look too. Clever

of you to put on a topaz necklace and ring. They match your hair. You'll do."

"Well, I didn't like to put on those diamond things you made me get the other day. Thought they might look as if I were showing off my money."

"You might hurt dear Miles' feelings."

"No, not that. He doesn't care a bit. He said so."

"No doubt he says so, all right," observed Anne, "but what one says one doesn't always feel."

"No, I've noticed that about you lately." The unexpectedness of this hit-back made Anne get to her feet and stare at her watch.

"Is it late? I must go." Cicely flung a white wrap, picked up her amber brocade bag.

"I'm taking the Rolls," she flung over her shoulder.

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The drive from Hampstead to London. Traffic lights—crème de menthe, benedictine, port—as Colin called them. Automatically slowing down, pushing in the gears, accelerating. Glorious, golden light splashing the streets, lighting up the barrows on the road of Camden Town. Here and there a red shirt, a blue blouse, an orange flower in a hat. The smooth slither of the tyres, the road, the rich bellow of the electric horn. The policeman's white-gloved hand. Belisha beacons like sticks of toffee. Then on again. An automaton obeying the rules of the road.

Miles' flat in St. James. Drawn blinds, soft, deep-piled carpets, great comfortable armchairs, books—masses of them—a few Morland prints, deep rich-coloured curtains and flowers. Just a man's room except for the flowers.

She smelled her own scent as she waited. No mirror in the room. He came in softly. The door clicked behind him. He looked well in tails. He stared straight into her face, then down to her shoes, then up again. He stood in front of her and put both his hands in hers.

"Nice of you to come. How well you dress."

"Do I?"

"You know you do." A pressure on her hands and he let them drop.

"Have a drink?"

"Please."

Pale sherry in old glasses. He said they must go. She told him she'd got the car. Driving through the streets with him by her side. Aware of his every movement. The Harveys' drawing-room, old-fashioned, chintzy, full of silver and old china. The Harvey girl radiantly pretty and young in pale green chiffon and pearls. A young man with a pink face and pinker nose.

Dinner—Miles chatting, absorbed in the pretty girl, Molly. Her host talking gently of trivial things, and then music. She was sure of her ground here. They discussed the difference between pure music and poetic music and tone poems. Mental images played a much larger part in pure music than we have been led to suppose, he said. "Take Sibelius' third symphony, for instance . . ."

Yes, she played the violin, but not for some time. She certainly must hear this new young discovery going to play at Queen's Hall, said her host. Miles deliberately butting into the conversation:

"I didn't know you were keen," he said.

All the rest politely meaningless, but so solid. English, comfortable. Women drinking little. Trifle with silver

balls on it; then grapes and pears and bananas. Cut glass finger bowls on lace mats. Cherry brandy for the women. Miles still laughing with Molly—a long way off—the other side of the table. The young man talking—the 'Varsity match, cricket scores—across her. She asked if he flew. No, he didn't fly. Didn't particularly want to.

Women alone upstairs. Lady Harvey confidential for a few moments. "We're so fond of Miles. We knew his father." She tinkled as she moved. "Such a pity they quarrelled, but you know how difficult it is with two clever men, clever in different directions." Her eyes lined and wise. "Miles was a classical scholar at Oxford. I often wonder if they aren't just a little superior in their manner, these scholars. Perhaps it's the weight of knowledge behind them." She laughed in a soothing way. "And somehow it's irritating for the plain John Blunts to come up against; more than anything else it gives them a sense of inferiority. To old Mr. Crispin a reference to the classics was like a red rag to a bull. . . . So glad to have met you—we must see more of each other, my dear."

Molly: "You two talking about Miles? Isn't he adorable?"

Lady Harvey: "Molly's quite foolish about Miles, aren't you, darling?"

"Yes, I love him dearly. I've told him so. But he won't look at me."

Cicely: "He's been looking at you all the evening."

"I mean, he's not aware of me."

Lady Harvey: "That sounds like a line from a play." They all laughed.

The ballet, engrossing in its delicate tracery. Living

music, thought Cicely, and forgot everything as she looked and listened to Tchaikowsky and Debussy. Miles as intent as she was. The end. They stood about. The young man carried Molly off to dance. She threw a despairing glance at Miles as a taxi swallowed her up. Lady Harvey suppressing a yawn and saying she must go home to bed.

"What shall we do?" asked Miles.

Nearly everybody had gone from the foyer. "Supper-dance?"

She nodded.

They found the car. It was hot. They went to the Café de Paris. Iced canteloupe. The feeling she ought to chat to him—like Molly. She was shy—estranged. She was not being a success. Seductive music. They danced. They moved beautifully together, without talking. She felt happy now. They sat down and sipped champagne. It reminded her of the party. She told him about it. He looked thoughtful.

"I don't quite get the young people of to-day," he remarked. "Their point of view, I mean. They seem so completely disillusioned. They find no heart or meaning in things."

"Of course, I don't know any in London," Cicely said. "In the country they seem more ordinary. Perhaps rather restless."

"To me they seem to think life owes them so much, yet they're antagonistic towards it," he went on. "They treat it like an inexhaustible banking account, always drawing out. It doesn't occur to them that it's so much more satisfactory to put something into it."

He asked suddenly: "Don't you want a child?"

"No—not yet." Her voice was low and shy.

"You think you want to get something out of life first?"

"Perhaps."

"That's because you've never been in love, I expect."

He glanced at her bent fair head. "You've found life up to now rather unsatisfactory. You haven't found it meaningless yet—you're still searching for the meaning."

"Am I? I hadn't thought."

He was looking at her long, firm fingers now. "That's what's so nice about you, Cicely. You don't consider yourself of enormous importance—you just carry on and do what you can for others."

She knew this was not quite true, but she had an irresistible desire to live up to the idea he expressed about her. It was the beginning of her slavery. The manner in which he seemed to guess at her thoughts amazed her. It was as if he had known her for years.

Sunning herself in his flattering absorption in her. The awakening longing to possess something of his background. She had seen where he lived, now she wanted to delve and probe into his mind, to discover what lay there. Already his elusiveness tantalized her.

She said at last daringly: "You say I haven't been in love. Have you?"

A silence. Had she offended him? He said: "Oh, yes, lots of times. What man hasn't?"

"I mean seriously."

"I was engaged for some years." He wriggled away from her questioning. "I'm very inconstant, Cicely. I like my freedom. I'm a weak mortal."

The words penetrated her mind. In spite of herself they remained—a note of warning. At this moment she pushed them away. She found she had a sense of humour she didn't know she possessed. Lots of things were funny and ridiculous. People, the shape of things, the remarks Miles made, the way a waiter walked. They laughed a good deal.

At last he said: "You'll forgive me, but I think I must go. I have a lot of work to-morrow."

To-morrow. She awoke to reality. He had to work. She could rest as long as she liked.

"I'll drive you back," she said.

In the car he said, "We'll do this again, shall we?"

She nosed the Rolls accurately to the entrance of his block. The engine purred. He leaned forward impulsively and shut it off. He opened the door for her to get out. They went up in the lift.

"Just for a small soda water or something," he explained.

She waited in the room she knew while he went in search of ice. There was a photograph she had not noticed before—no, more than one. A young woman, not pretty, but with fine beautiful features—a personality. The other old and homely and kind. His mother, she thought. And a photograph of his father. The three people who matter in his life—she thought again and felt they were watching her.

Miles came back with a tray. She would like a gin and tonic. With neat, precise movements he poured it out. The rattle of ice. He looked at her attentively while she sipped it.

"All right?"

"Yes, rather."

She tried not to show how nervous she felt. "It's lovely," she answered appreciatively.

Still looking at her, he said, a note of pleading in his voice :

"Don't drink too much. You may be tempted to in this new life of yours. You're not used to it, are you?"

She laughed. "No, we couldn't run to it—before."

He took the glass from her hands. His arms were round her. "You're a pretty thing," he said. "I'm so glad I've found you."

He kissed her gently, lingeringly on the lips. Passively poised she gave herself up to the moment, her thoughts and mind suspended.

"Now you must go," he said, as if to a child.

"Yes."

She came back to earth. He took her to the lift and rang the bell. While they waited he smiled at her reassuringly.

She whispered, "Good night."

In the car. She drove slowly. Thinking over the events of the evening. Nothing of importance had happened really, but she felt she knew him very much better. Seeing him with other people had given her a better idea of him. She had felt less shy. But she was tired. Curious, that sense of strain she was conscious of when he was there, an odd feeling that every moment must be lived. Only two meetings, yet they had changed the whole trend of her thoughts, aims and ambitions.

What was the meaning of his kiss? Did he kiss most of his women friends like that? Now her thoughts whirled this way and that. Her mind in a turmoil.

She drove faster. At last—the car in the garage. It was not until she reached the door of the flat and found it open that she remembered the party.

The drawing-room looked odd in the full blare of lights. Ceiling lights, wall lights and the standards all ablaze. Chairs and tables pushed back against the wall; no rugs; glasses everywhere, and odds and ends of cigarettes and ash and crumbs scattered all around.

They were dancing. But not graciously, showing a joy of movement. There was something hostile in the way in which they moved with small, studied, niggardly steps, this being and that very close together, in perfect unison, yet as if they were antagonistic to each other. It was hot. The young men's flannel trousers hung over the backs of their shoes. Why did she notice that, she wondered? She was tired and excited. Here she felt out of it. She preferred the solid atmosphere of the Harveys' world. The wireless emitted longing croons, sighs and cries above the dance tunes.

Anne saw her and slipped away from a tall, white-faced young man to drag her by the hand. She saw Anne looked odd. Too much champagne, she thought.

No one took any notice of her, although they were evidently aware that she was the owner of the flat. Hostesses were unimportant people. After all, if she wished to throw a party, she ought to be jolly thankful that people came along to make it for her.

"Cicely, Mrs. Faulkner is here. She's been waiting to meet you. Let's go and find her."

They found her in Cicely's bedroom, sitting on the bed and talking to another woman who was making a

thorough examination of the tiny cupboard where Cicely kept her face creams and powder. They were both smoking Egyptian cigarettes and flicking the ash on to the floor. Yet Enid Faulkner was charm personified when she realized who Cicely was. She patted a place by her side, inviting Cicely to sit down on her own bed. With a little bewildered glance at Anne, who was smiling in a funny crooked way, she did as she was expected.

"We're so very interested in all this, Mrs. Matthews and I. I feel I know you, having heard so much from Ernest. It's all so romantic. How does it feel to be rich—really rich?"

Bennett came in with full glasses.

"You still up, Bennett?" Cicely asked with some surprise.

"Yes, madam." Her eyes were bright; she was evidently enjoying herself. "I thought I'd better, in case anything's wanted. Mr. Colin said they might want bacon and eggs later."

Enid Faulkner took a proffered glass and waved Bennett and the glasses towards her friend.

"A lovely party," she murmured, "Such a nice flat. But I suppose you furnished it in a great hurry?" She turned her sloe-like eyes on Cicely, who noticed that her lipstick had slipped alarmingly to the outside edge of her lips only. She was a woman to be reckoned with, however. Forceful and with an air of assured knowledge.

"No, I don't think so," Cicely said uncertainly. "It took several weeks."

What was the matter with the flat? She remembered now that when she had asked Miles if he liked it, he had

merely remarked that it suited her. He hadn't said he liked it very much." After all, Mrs. Faulkner was an authority.

"Don't you approve?" she asked now.

"Well," a heavily ringed hand waved in the air. "It's just a flat—furnished—that is to say, with a few pieces in it and some curtains, isn't it? If you'll forgive my saying so, my dear, you haven't expressed yourself in it. At least, I hope you haven't," she murmured.

Anne laughed at the subtle rudeness. This woman was amusing at any rate and it would do Cicely good.

"But I expect it's only temporary. After all, it takes months of study and building up and eliminating before one arrives at a work of art, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does."

Mrs. Matthews broke in. "Oh, Enid will go on talking for ever about her subject if you let her. I must say this for her, though, she knows what she's talking about. Her designs for Lady Single's whole house were lovely. You ought to see them." She picked up a pot of cream. "Do you always use this?"

"Well, sometimes. Not always. Generally I can't be bothered."

"My dear," Mrs. Matthews rose in consternation. "With your beautiful skin. Why, you ought to treat it with the utmost care—really you should. In London especially. Let me look."

She came and peered into Cicely's face. "Just as I thought. Open pores beginning. You need regular massage and face packs. Just a light one to keep the tissues clean and taut and a good tonic. Then a soupçon of anti-wrinkle cream round the eyes—to keep that tired look at bay. You must take care. That beautiful

fresh look you have will soon disappear." She sipped her drink. "You come round and see me soon and I'll show you how it's all done."

"Rose is a beauty specialist," Enid Faulkner explained, "One of the best in London. You must have heard of Rosa Rose."

"Of course," said Cicely. Who hadn't seen the advertisement consisting of a ravishingly beautiful young woman in duplicate—one with a mud pack on, looking like a diver, the other disclosing the finished article radiating health and beauty?

"I hope so," said Rosa Rose hastily, "or I should think my advertising was at fault. You, too, my dear." She turned to Anne. "You especially must look after yourself. I'm speaking to you as a friend now, not as a specialist."

"Very kind," murmured Cicely. She wished these women would go out of her room. Enid Faulkner, who prided herself on her tact and did not approve of Rosa Rose's direct methods, got up languidly.

"I'm so glad to have met you, Ernest's friends. If I can give you any advice, do let me know. I should be only too glad to help. I must tell Vivienne, when I see her, how lovely you look in her dress. We must go now."

Anne faltered: "How is Ernest?"

"Still buried in the country, I believe, leading a hermit life. I'm going down to see him next week—must keep in touch."

"Oh."

"Yes." The sloe eyes watched Anne's rising colour. "I must tell him how well and happy you both are and what a good time you're having."

"Yes, do," said Anne and turned away. She's going to try to get money out of him, she thought wildly. Poor Ernest. It was what she had feared. Little hints, subtle phrases had been dropped by Enid, showing the trend of her affairs. Sometimes she had been almost certain she knew of her friendship with Ernest. She could say nothing with Cicely there. Cicely so remote. Somehow she managed to get the two women into the hall and out of the door. When she went back to Cicely's room she found the door locked. With a shrug she returned to the drawing-room and told Bennett to go to bed.

"Bacon and eggs will not be wanted," she said.

VIII

CICELY'S friendship with Miles Crispin steadily progressed. Cicely found the whole course of her life, thoughts and ambitions undergoing a subtle but definite change. With each successive meeting her knowledge of him increased, as well as her reliance on him, although she did not realize this.

His dinner visit came and went. After the preparations for it and Anne and Colin's bright expectations, it fell rather flat. Miles made it distinctly clear that it was only Cicely he was interested in, refusing all attempts to draw him into the family circle and amusements. He made no comment on Jim's absence.

After dinner they played bad bridge in the drawing-room, with the windows wide open. At last Anne, having made an obvious, shocking blunder, drew attention to the moon sliding past the window in a clear, blue-black sky, and suggested a walk on the heath, much to everybody's relief. Miles lit one of Colin's cigars, which he pronounced excellent, and fell in with the suggestion.

The night was warm and coaxing, the Spaniard's Road thick with people, old and young, strolling, chatting, laughing, all drinking in the air after their day's work in offices, factories, tenement houses.

"Rather pathetic," said Anne.

"Why?" Miles suddenly challenged, shattering their serenity.

"I dunno," said Anne. "Only this seems a poor substitute for what they are really looking for—open spaces, real lonely country and fresh air, instead of all being cluttered up together."

"Misplaced sentiment, don't you think? Most of these people are Londoners born and bred, and I wouldn't mind betting they'd rather be here, all together, than in the depths of the country."

"How practical you are," laughed Anne, nettled, glancing at his well set-up figure and thinking he looked self-satisfied.

"Just because you adore the country yourself," began Cicely.

No, the evening was not entirely successful, Cicely considered, realizing that Anne and Colin thought him rather pompous and dull, yet inwardly pleased that he didn't fall and worship at Anne's shrine.

They did not meet often—not more than once a week, and then Cicely knew she was taking her place in a series of engagements, public dinners, private dinners, bridge and theatre parties. Generally they dined at some quiet restaurant or she drove him in her car to Bray, where they dined in the garden by the river. She loved to sit and watch the sunset behind the trees, turning the water to crimson and shimmering green as a farewell gesture. When at last it finally withdrew its favours and the river, now a pewter grey snake, radiated a cool chill, Miles would get up and take her away. He was very careful of her health and Cicely, who was rarely ill, revelled in his care.

Many things she learned about him during these few weeks. She discovered, for instance, that he loathed being asked about his movements and doings, that he

enjoyed life to the full, that he considered that all individuals were entitled to their individuality and own standards of living, women especially—therefore personal criticism and fault-finding were superfluous. On the other hand, he was a good judge of character, with an instinctive knowledge of people's motives, weaknesses and strength. He did not expect too much of his friends just because they were friends; he admired loyalty but did not expect it. And he could laugh at himself.

Gradually, as their intimacy grew, Cicely more and more unfolded her thoughts and ideas for his consideration, not acknowledging to herself that many of these were entirely new-born and probably never would have reached the light of day if she hadn't surely and irrevocably fallen in love.

With zest she read her papers, even the law news. She became a theatre and film fan. Her sudden desire to visit the National Gallery and the Tate filled Anne with surprise, but together they spent long, hot afternoons, genuinely absorbed in the beauty they had so long allowed to pass them by. Life became thrilling, full of interest, enthralling—but exacting.

At this time she did not think of the future; she allowed the stream to carry her on, greeting each day as it came with a sense of adventure. Sometimes doubt seized her and she wondered if Miles was getting bored with this friendship which she found so utterly absorbing and enriching. He did not make deliberate love to her. A pressure of the hand, a light kiss when they parted, a tiny, pleasing caress—that was all.

Jim, busy with his work, withdrew himself from her ordinary daily life. When he showed interest in her movements it was so easy to evade direct answers.

Anne and Colin, now full of engagements, were tactful enough to avoid questions, although Anne was thoroughly aware of the whole situation. She was glad on the whole that Cicely had found friends of her own. She liked Lady Harvey and her quiet, rather sedate friends who gave their spare time to charity, arranging balls, bridge afternoons and hospital fêtes. Cicely was persuaded to sit on various committees, and took bridge lessons, "so she shouldn't look so foolish at parties."

In her present mood it was easy to persuade her to allow Enid Faulkner to re-arrange the flat. Anne said quite frankly :

"You see, if you pay her for doing it, she won't keep pestering Ernest for more money."

Cicely looked up from the letter she was writing.

"I thought you'd forgotten him long ago, you're so busy with Peter and Rex and all the others."

"Oh—them. They're only fooling. They're fun to go around with." Her tone was evasive. "But I don't care."

Then suddenly she made up her mind to broach the subject she'd been trying to lead up to for a long time. She said :

"Cicely, it's a beastly thing to have to ask, but I must must get the position clear. It's about money. You see, somehow all these people have an idea I'm quite rich—because of you, I suppose, and really the pocket money you give Colin and me doesn't go anywhere. We want to join the air club; of course, Colin can't get his certificate because of his chest, but I could. Oh, and there are so many other things."

"I'll increase your allowance," Cicely promptly said.

Anne stood at the window, hands in her sweater

pockets, gazing at the sunlit heath. She hesitated, then turned and said :

"Look here, Cicely, it's all so bloody, this money question. Wouldn't it be better to settle a definite sum on Colin and me so we don't have to come begging from you? It must be beastly for you, too."

Cicely went on writing her letter to her mother as if the sudden request hadn't startled her, but between her and the clear, bold characters as she set them down on her thick, new writing-paper, came a rush of dismayed thoughts. Anne free of her—Colin, too. They could do what they liked, could go where they liked. No, they were too young for that, too irresponsible. Bloody. . . . Anne never used a word like that before. It only went to show. . . . To give them their allowance no more on Monday morning—that in itself was always such a pleasure. The crisp notes, the murmured "thank-yous." The feeling that this life was good, the knowledge that she, with her money, was giving happiness and that she was in control. Yes, that was it—they needed control. It would be unwise to give them a free hand. Anne had been queer lately. She had shown quite plainly that she considered Cicely was deceiving Jim in the matter of Miles. Still, after all, Anne was only a child, while she was a married woman.

She put down her pen and carefully bent over the blotting-paper as she said :

"But you and Colin are not used to handling your own money."

"If I had a job I should have to . . ."

"A job . . . but what could you do?"

Yes, she had hit the nail on the head. What, after all, could Anne do? Anne knew herself how inadequate

she appeared among these Londoners, with their quick wits and opportunities for learning and excelling. Even her games were rotten—tennis medium, golf almost a joke.

"I could be a mannequin."

"Could you?" Cicely's tone was unbelieving.

Anne said now: "So you don't think the money idea is good?"

"No," said Cicely, "I don't, honestly." She felt awkward, and at a loss, talking to Anne like this. Anne, whom she had always felt to be a stronger character than she was, in spite of her youth. But that was in the past: now she had the upper hand.

"All right, just as you like." Anne turned again to the window. "I only thought it would be easier for all of us. After all, I can go back and live with mother if I get really bored."

"Bored? But aren't you liking all this?"

"It's not bad at times. But when everyone thinks you're rolling and you haven't got a bean—it's utterly putrid."

"Oh, but you shall have a lot more," Cicely said quickly. "You know you've only got to ask when you want new clothes and I'll pay the bills."

"Yes," Anne said slowly, "that's just it—asking."

Cicely now longed to question her about the young men she knew—all about everything—but Anne in this mood was hopeless. She said now placatingly:

"Anyway, I'll let Enid Faulkner have a free hand here and I've been to that other woman to have my face done."

"Good."

On another occasion, Anne demanded quite suddenly :

"Cicely, are you keen on Miles Crispin?"

"No—of course not."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's true."

"You know it isn't, and you ought to face it."

"There's nothing to face."

"Oh, lord!" Anne bounced out of the room.

Jim enquired lazily at breakfast one morning :

"By the way, did Miles Crispin come to dinner that night?"

Cicely reddened. "Yes."

"Seen him again?" Jim was busy with his bacon and eggs. His voice was casual.

She was glad they were alone. "He's arranged a theatre-party to-night, and he's invited me," she said after a pause.

"Oh." Jim sipped his tea. "Of course, no one but a woman could stand a position like that. You take a man's birthright and then quite calmly become his guest, too."

Exasperated at last, Cicely broke out :

"Why do you say things like that? He doesn't mind much about the money—we talked it over. And if he wants to be friends, I think it's up to us to agree. It was very rude of you to go out the night he came. It isn't as if I tried to take his money from him."

He looked up, surprised at her flushed face. She was very near tears.

"I've made enquiries about him," he went on, "and he's a man who's doing fairly well in his job. He's got lots of friends. Then why should he come and push himself in here, except from curiosity and an idea of

spying on my work? I hope you won't ask him here again, that's all."

She had become accustomed to shutting her eyes to the things she didn't want to face where Jim was concerned, feeling so sure that in the end he would come round to her point of view. But now she saw that streak of obstinacy coming out, fastening itself like moss round this one subject, clinging to it, nurturing it, refusing to let it go. She hated quarrelling with Jim.

"It's a pity. He's not in the least the kind of person you think he is, Jim. You're being childish."

He looked straight at her, his eyes large through his glasses.

"And you've become so excessively grown up, Snooks, I hardly recognize you. By the way, is it true you've been asked to go on the committee of the St. Mildred's Rose Ball? Someone told me in the lab."

"Yes, it's true. I thought I'd accept. Don't you think it's a good thing?"

"Who asked you?"

"The President—Lady Sinclair. I met her at a party."

"Whose party?"

"Oh, some charity bridge do, given by Lady Harvey."

"I haven't heard of her. I don't know how you meet these people or how you do these things," he grumbled, but more pleasantly.

Cicely sighed with relief. "Well, one thing leads to another. Directly they know you're willing to help and have got the time for it you're in great demand."

"You're good at pulling strings, Snooks," he conceded with a smile. "I don't care, as long as you leave me to do my work and don't drag me into this social

stuff. It's extraordinary the people you know in such a short time. Colin worries me, though."

"Yes—Colin."

"Can't you tell him to go?"

"I have. He says he feels all right and wants to spend the summer here."

Jim grunted.

That same night after the theatre, Miles suggested a run in the car out into the country. He drove. Cicely sat back, silently watching the headlights nosing their brilliant tentacles remorselessly into the deep shadows of the road, trees and hedges. As usual, all her attention was riveted on Miles. He had been quiet to-night, sternly critical of the play, which was one of those maundering comedies without a climax. She had lied to Jim. It was not a party, unless you could call two a party.

Miles drove well, deliberately, never taking risks but seizing all opportunities. She noticed he had drunk more than usual at dinner. He told her he was tired, very busy working up a difficult case, working up a big brief. Besides, he'd had a late night the night before. She asked him about it and in a casual manner he told her it was a large wedding supper party at the Dorchester. Not being able to resist, she enquired if the woman was pretty.

"Extremely," he had answered with a quiet reminiscent smile, "and the cabaret girls really lovely."

She thought about it now as they drove. She had noticed often that where women were concerned he was very observant, taking in details which an ordinary man like Jim never would. It perturbed her. She

wondered what he was thinking of now. He looked stern as he drove, his fair hair a little blown by the wind. He had complimented her to-night about her charity work, saying that Lady Harvey was very pleased with the way she tackled things. His praise thrilled her absurdly.

Then the car stopped by the side of a copse.

"Shall we stroll?" he said, and without waiting for her answer he opened the door for her to get out. He took her arm and guided her through an opening of the trees. Twigs crackled under her feet, the smell of dry bracken enveloped them, trees whispered and rustled their mature leaves gently above them in the warm night breeze.

"No one knows in the least where we are," he remarked. "Rather fun."

Like a small boy having a game, thought Cicely.

"I say, look at this." They stopped before a huge elm, its trunk enveloped, and even its branches, with the twining shoots of honeysuckle. Cicely sniffed in the sweet scent and said dreamily:

"I wonder if it will choke it."

"Which will choke what?" he asked her, and then added: "You're a little obscure in your remarks, darling."

It was the first time he had called her that. The way he said it in his low, charming voice sent the blood rushing to her temples. She stood still, fearing to break the spell which suddenly seemed to envelop them. He went on after a pause:

"The honeysuckle will win, don't you think?"

She didn't answer. She felt his hand under her chin.

"Look at me, Cicely. Don't you think it will?"

"I don't know," she faltered, as she raised her eyes to his.

"You do know—you know very well." He talked wildly without meaning. He took her in his arms and pressed kisses on her face, her hair, her neck, murmuring sweet incoherent things. "You're so attractive—so lovely—such a child really—fresh . . . sweet . . . I've longed to do this for ages. . . ."

The ecstasy of the moment on her, she gave herself up to the first taste of real mutual love-making she had ever experienced. Strange emotions swept away reticence. Her soft lips returned his kisses, at first shyly, and then as his arms tightened around her she forgot everything but the near presence of this being who had filled her thoughts for weeks, and the need to identify herself with her love.

At last she pulled herself away and stood staring at the dark ground.

"What's the matter?"

"I feel so disloyal—to Jim, I mean." Her voice shook.

His arm was round her shoulders, pressing her against his side. Somehow his gesture gave her a sense of security.

"Nonsense. . . . You're a free agent. Besides, you knew this must come. Right from the start."

Had she known? She hadn't allowed herself to think, that was it.

"Did I? I don't think I did." Helplessly she looked at him in the half-light. Now he pulled her to him again. She heard his whisper:

"Yes—and now it can't stop here, can it?"

Again the sweet madness had her in its grip, all

coherent thought flung aside by the fierce onslaught of his kisses. He let her go quite suddenly and laughed softly. "Come along, child, I must take you home. I've given you enough to think about for one night."

She gave a last lingering look at the elm and its burden of honeysuckle as she went, bidding it good-bye. It was, after all, a landmark in her life.

He held her hand tightly as they walked. They found the car and got in.

"Cold?"

"No."

"You are, you're shivering, darling."

She turned to him. "Miles, whatever happens, whatever I do, I mustn't hurt Jim. He mustn't be hurt."

Very gently he said: "No, of course not. Jim shan't be hurt. It's the last thing we want."

Was he sincere or was he just humouring her? She couldn't make up her mind. He drove fast. Once he said, when they reached a block of traffic and had to wait:

"Don't be so serious. Go on being happy as you were in the wood."

She laughed softly. "I am—I am."

Then when they reached her flat, he kissed her hand. "We'll meet again soon—I'll ring up."

That same evening Anne soared up and up into the sparkling sky with Peter. Down below, Colin watched them enviously. He went into the Club lounge and stared at aerial maps, then ordered a gin and tonic. Girls came, in flying helmets and suits in various colours. He thought how pretty they were, like slim teddy-bears. Some of them had planes of their own. Easy to learn to fly really. So damnable not to be able to get a certi-

ificate just because you weren't quite fit. He really must go to Switzerland. Old Jim seemed to think it was the best thing to do. Only Anne didn't want him to, didn't want to be left. Poor kid—she was feeling rotten about things, although she didn't let on much. Pity Cicely wouldn't fork up a definite sum of money. She might easily, only he guessed she liked to keep them all under her thumb. Couldn't blame her, really—she evidently got a kick out of just having money, like lots of other people—or why did men go on accumulating it when they were already rich?

That was a really pretty girl over there. He'd like to kiss her, she looked so adorable. Only it wouldn't be fair—you couldn't be too careful about this lung business. Lord, he wished he was fit, fit like Peter. Funny how old Jim went on working and living his own life and didn't mix with them much—but then, of course, he always had, even at home. He saw very little of Cicely then—she always told mother so. Some men were fools, really—so unconscious of women's reactions. Specially the ones who hadn't got sisters. Perhaps some men were made like that—they couldn't be bothered with women, they liked them up to a point, but beyond that they dismissed them. If you really wanted to hold a woman, you'd got to make her your companion as well as all the rest. . . .

In the air, Anne threw back her head and laughed. They were climbing steadily. The wind whined past the plane. She was exhilarated, ready, waiting. Peter had promised to do some stunts and she knew he wouldn't spare her. Suddenly there was a lurch—she felt as if Peter, the plane, the cockpit and all had gone and left her sitting there in mid-air. Involuntarily she shut her

eyes. The straps round her seemed to tighten. The sound of the engine rose and fell. There was a sickening side-slip towards the ground. She must fall out now. . . . She prepared to hit the ground. Now they had resumed level flight. She was safe with Peter. The blood rushed to her head and thrummed in her temples. This must be a loop, now a roll, a spin and flick turn. . . . She had heard about them all so often. So hard to distinguish, though, when your tummy was where your head ought to be, and vice versa.

They rushed along, the wind screaming through the wires. She felt more compact now ; at least, she didn't feel as if she were in tiny pieces. They climbed up and up, till at last the engine could stand the work no longer and she stalled. But the danger was only momentary. Peter, calm as if he was on the ground, recovered control and a moment later they were gliding gracefully down to a perfect three-point landing. There was Colin waiting for them on the landing-ground.

Later, she was back in Peter's flat. Colin had stayed behind at the Air Club. Someone had promised him a joy ride.

Peter, large and burly in his dark green high-necked sweater under a grey tweed coat, switched on the electric gramophone, which on the whole was the largest piece of furniture in the room, excepting the arm-chairs, and told Anne to make herself comfortable. The flat was in a quiet street off Harley Street, and most of the rooms in the building were occupied by doctors. She picked up the *Bystander* and curled herself up comfortably. She could hear Peter talking at the telephone in the hall. His discussion seemed to be prolonged. At last he appeared, and, going to a table by the window, slammed

some ice in glasses furiously and made a syphon roar with such vigour that she asked :

"What's up ?"

"That fool—Harmony."

"What about her ? Thought you were such great friends."

"Friends ? I like the term. She's becoming a damned nuisance."

"Oh."

Peter as a rule refrained from discussing his girl acquaintances. She liked that about him.

He gave her an iced drink and sat on the arm of her chair, gazing morosely in front of him.

"She battled along well to-day, didn't she ?"

"Yes, rather—fine. I bet poor old Colin was envious, seeing you do those stunts."

"You were pretty good. Not scared ?"

"No—not really. My tummy was a bit difficult to cope with."

He lurched sideways and laid his cheek on her curls.

"You've got nice legs."

She raised them one by one and examined them critically. Certainly the stockings fitted well.

"Think so ?"

"Umph. In fact, you're not bad altogether." He pushed his face deeper into her hair. "You were so good this afternoon, I'm going to take you out to feed."

"Alone ?"

"Yes, alone."

She pondered over this. She had never dined alone with him. Always someone joined in, and generally it developed into a party at a snack-bar.

"I'm not sure I shall come."

"Well, don't then." He looked sulkier than ever.

"Just because Harmony won't go with you."

"Oh, hell, Anne." He was down by her side, hugging her to him. "I don't care a damn about Harmony. I'm crazy about you. It was me—I put her off to take you."

She liked being kissed by him. He was such a dear. He lay with his head on her shoulder.

"How old are you, Peter?"

"Twenty-eight—quite old compared to you."

"I'm old for my age," said Anne.

He played with the wrist watch Cicely had given her.

"I say, have you ever gone the whole way with anyone—you know what I mean—really fallen for them?"

She didn't know what to say. She had heard questions like this openly talked of amongst his friends. She didn't want to appear ignorant and provincial, yet she didn't like discussing these things—except, of course, with Ernest. She felt shy.

"Why do you want to know, Peter?" she asked gently.

She had heard a great deal about his success with girls, and all this was probably a usual method he adopted. All the same she was fond of him; he was worth dozens of people like Rex Faulkner, who was too torrid for anything, and she was rather pleased if she was really cutting Harmony out.

"Here, stand up."

He dragged her out of the chair and stood in front of her and looked her up and down. Then, giving her a slap on each cheek with each of his big hands, covered with oil from the engine, he said :

"Because I must know—see?"

He really seemed in earnest. Did he want to find out if she was "fair game" or what? If he found she wasn't, he'd lose interest, no doubt. How beastly it all was. Now she was angry with him for putting her into this position and yet she knew they all did it—talked about what used to be women's close secrets in a careless way. Yet she liked going about with him. She'd miss him awfully. Of course he'd just pass on to someone else.

She put her hands behind her back, as she always did when she had something important to say and flung back her head.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Peter, but I haven't."

"Are you all soul and no sex like your sister, then?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, she's a bit schoolmistressy, isn't she? At least I thought so. She's got that don't-touch-me air—rather grim."

"She's got principles, perhaps—ideals, or whatever you call them."

"Oh, God. . . ."

Anger, a sense of frustration, a loss to understand, made her burst out:

"Don't you believe in anything? Don't you stick to anything? Aren't you loyal to anything or anyone? You and all your friends."

Half expecting him to dismiss her outburst with derision, she was taken by surprise when he pulled her—rather like a dog dragging a bone, she thought—back into the arm-chair. She half lay, half sat in a precarious position, somewhere between the region of his knee, chest and non-existent lap.

"Come here, you. I want to talk to you. Now, look here—" It seemed that her hair fascinated him; he was not able to resist kissing it. "All those things you talk about—principles and such-like—should be got over in the early twenties or before, like measles and chicken-pox. I've had them, so I know. They're merely a form of self-deception—people commit the most howling blunders under cover of them. You tear the cover away and you'll find the most awful creepy-crawly slimy thoughts and intentions hidden and being harboured underneath. Like those roly bugs you get under a nice piece of dry wood."

"Oh, I know all that," sulked Anne. "But you've got to hang on to something or you're done."

"Hang on to your self-respect," he said triumphantly, "that's the only thing. Stand alone. Self-effort's the thing. Make your body and mind do things—win things—stand terrific strain. Don't be afraid, Anne. Use life, don't fear it. Fear is awful—rotting—it wastes your vitality. Live in the present. Thinking of the future means fear of it."

Was that why he raced in cars and aeroplanes, rode in steeplechases, was never still?

"You're talking rot," Anne said steadily. "Harmony and Rex and the others, they just slack about. They may respect themselves, but no one else does, though they're quite fun."

"At least they face facts and they're not afraid to," he said. "They live in the open."

A silence fell and he began to kiss her again. A horrible weakness seized her. She remembered as she lay in Peter's arms that silly threat she had made to Ernest, it seemed ages ago, about making men fall for

her and then hurting them. Hurting them—you couldn't hurt men—they were invulnerable, selfish, self-sufficient.

Peter wouldn't really care if she never saw him again, and the odd thing was she didn't want to go out of his life.

"Funny baby, aren't you?" he said now. "You're not being true to yourself one bit—you're trying to be true to someone else. Who is he?"

She couldn't lie or deny.

"Someone who doesn't want me. He thinks I'm too young."

"How much older?"

"Twenty years."

"I'll make you forget him, Anne sweet. Let me, won't you? I do want to so much, and you want to, too."

An insidious langour she could no longer control was gradually but surely creeping over her mind and body. After all, why go on fighting, struggling to preserve something nobody wanted—at least not for long. It was so complex, that something—it was not only loyalty, a desire to give and scatter, but it was the very heart of things, the thrill of something beautiful—a flower against a wall, the sun on the wings of Peter's plane, a sunset—a joke. Could he take away this ache of loneliness, this sense of utter futility? Perhaps she could compromise, split it up. Give him part but not all. Anyway he wouldn't appreciate beauty—that was a secret she shared with Ernest. Things they had seen together, simple country things, but as satisfying as the greatest panorama of mountain scenery in the world. But she and Peter could go on doing things together: perhaps he'd let her race with him.

"Peter dear, you are sweet, but. . . ."

"But what, ducks?"

A thought, like the slash of a knife cut away her languor. She sat up.

"Oh, Peter, no, no, I couldn't. I might get to like you too much—much too much, and then I'd be lonelier than ever."

"Lord, what a frightened little rabbit you are. Look here, Anne, you've got no spark of a sense of adventure, have you now? I can't make promises I can't keep, can I? I might go on liking you for ages, mightn't I? I don't know—that's why I don't want to marry anyone, because I can't trust myself to give a square deal."

Helplessly she said, "I wondered—why you don't marry. You've got money."

"When I was twenty-four, I asked a girl. My people approved and everything. And she said she wanted to have what she called 'an unofficial honeymoon' first to make quite sure we'd be happy together."

"And did you?"

"Yes—in the end. I didn't like the idea at all. You see, I was full of those things you call ideals about my wife."

"What happened?"

"Gradually the idea of marriage petered out. I got bored, and she found someone else. It's you girls really who spoil things in the beginning, when a man's young."

Bewilderment made her head ache now. Round and round the bush they were arguing, getting nowhere.

"But love—Peter—don't you believe in that?"

"Not much. You see, I'd just as soon be married to you as anybody. You don't try to be clever, although

you've got a quick brain and you like doing the things I do and you're pretty and sweet and desirable, but I don't know if I'd always feel like this."

"No—we might hate each other. Did you ever feel like that about Harmony?"

"Heavens, no—she just came along at a party, and there you are."

"I see. Peter, I'm hungry."

"So am I, frightfully."

She flung herself free of him and stood up. "Come on, let's go."

"We haven't decided anything," he grumbled. "Gosh, I am hungry. We'll come back and finish our talk afterwards."

"We can't talk about love on an empty tummy," she said, "I'm going to tidy."

They laughed together suddenly, spontaneously and he kissed her open mouth.

"Go on then. Hurry up with the make-up. You know, I really do believe I love you a bit. Put on the lip stuff that sticks—I don't want it all over my face."

"Right."

"I say," she called from the bathroom, "What's your mother like?"

"Broad-minded—broad in the bust, but beautiful. Loves gardening."

"Father?"

"John Bullish. Never leaves Roundwood. Loves his farms. Wants me to marry and settle down, preferably with the moustached daughter of a neighbouring squire, a scion of a noble house and failing that will be thankful as long as it isn't from the back row of the chorus—his remark. Hurry up, my inside's squeaking."

He strolled to the door and watched her putting stuff on her lashes.

"I got this from Enid Faulkner's friend. It costs the earth."

"It would. Bloody woman. I like Enid though. There's something hard and fine about her and she's decent to people who hate her—you for instance."

"What makes you think I hate her?"

"She told me so. She was quite upset about it."

"But I've persuaded Cicely to let her re-do the whole flat."

"I wonder why you did that?" Whistling softly, he went back to his sitting-room.

He guesses, thought Anne as she washed her hands, Peter guesses.

Down at Barty Jim prowled around the garden. At intervals peace lay a kindly hand on his troubled, restless mind, suffusing it with a temporary contentment. Bright evening sunlight flooded the calm garden, intensifying the colours of the ramblers, dripping from the pergola in a confusion of riotous loveliness, touching the luminous blue of delphiniums till their petals gleamed shiningly transparent. Light—colour—form: a trinity of beauty. While he drank it all in, his thoughts turned to the calves in the stables. Old Cottee had been pathetically pleased to do the work and waxed enthusiastic over the chart brackets for each pen. He would start with twenty-four animals, giving them varying doses, then watch the results and see how he got on. Old Cottee's daughter had just recovered from measles; he must look at her after dinner, on his way to see Cicely's mother, then perhaps she'd let him take some of her

blood—they wanted some measles anti-serum badly at St. Mildred's.

As he thought about it, he smoked his pipe and bit at the stem. To-morrow he'd go over to the County Hospital and see how they were all getting on. Funny how easy it was to drop out and no one seemed to miss you except people like old Cottee and a few grateful patients. If he did any good with the research work on a big scale, it would only be humanity in a mass—an impersonal mass—who'd benefit; whereas in hospital work you came in contact with poor blighters and their gratitude.

He kicked at a fungus growing on the path. Damn Crispin—damn the whole show. Cicely going to seed in the pathetic belief that she was living at last, because she was always in a rush and hurry, and deluding herself she was doing good by sitting on committees. All they needed was her money. A fat cheque and that, so to speak, would settle them. Had to let her go her own way, though, he could do nothing but stand by and await events. Useless to make claims or try to tie any woman down. Only sometimes he wanted to soothe and comfort her and make her see reason as he used to; at others he longed to shake her. No good—she had drifted too far away for that. Her new-found worldliness wrapped her round like a hedgehog's coat. She was touchy and she repulsed his feeblest effort.

Work—that was the only thing. Work, work, work, Nature had made women too complex—he'd always thought so, right from his student days. To follow their vagaries and moods, varying as those did with the ebb and flow of health, and punctuated by time,

was an all-time job. He was, he supposed, more of a scientist than a psychologist by instinct, and couldn't spare the time, like Richards, for instance, who studied his wife from every aspect and unceasingly. That was why he was such a successful consultant, no doubt, specially with women.

Perhaps it was the War that sapped his energy, destroyed romance—if that was the name for it. Anyway, since then he had not been interested in the trimmings of life: there was no room for them. Hard material facts—disease one of them—loomed too large on his horizon.

But he missed Cicely, the part she played in his everyday life, and the evenings they used to have together here. Blast the damned money and its responsibilities.

He went in to tell Dorothy he was ready for his meal. He was glad he'd kept her here. Her heavy tread, the red hands scarred by last winter's chilblains, her clumsy method of shutting the door behind her, which had always irritated Cicely so much, made him feel at home.

"It's steak and kidney pudden, sir, your favourite. And mushrooms I gathered meself in the flood medders, and some water cresses."

Thank God for Barty and Dorothy. . . .

IX

CICELY sat at the top table with the president. The room, full of flowers, scented women, the murmur of voices, rose before her in a haze. Through the windows open to the park she could see figures active in the burning sunshine, nurses with children, small boys running helter-skelter, cars glittering with reflected light. The trees looked cool and jolly. The breeze bellied the curtains and hid her view, so she fastened her gaze on the cut-glass inkstand supported by stag horns in front of her.

The president droned on about details of the programme . . . kind people who have promised to help. . . . We propose that. . . . Last year, as you all know, we cleared . . . most satisfactory. . . . This year we must . . . we will do better. . . . A grand success with your co-operation.

Where was Miles now—in court, or in his chambers? She tried to imagine him in a wig. Did he wear one? She must ask him. All night she had lain awake thinking, but with a glow at her heart. It was a wonderful thing to love and to know you were loved. But why, oh why had it come so late in her life—too late, in fact, for it to be a divinely peaceful, beautiful fulfilment? Secrecy, surreptitious meetings were ugly—and the the knowledge you might be hurting someone else running through the whole thing like a loose thread in

a perfect pattern. She was necessary to Jim—she had no doubt on that point—and he loved her. She was responsible for him. In a way this gave her satisfaction. But she loved Miles, and not only loved him but admired, respected him in every way. Was it wrong, this feeling she had for him? She couldn't help herself, she argued desperately; it was just there and she couldn't get away from it. It tinged everything she did or thought; he was always present in the background of her mind. At unexpected moments she heard an inflection of his voice, remembered a movement of his hands, the way his hair grew off his temples. And then, would Miles approve, would he think this the right thing to do, and so on and so on all through the day.

Just because she had been too ignorant when she married Jim to recognize the difference between being fond of a man and loving him, was she to deny herself this wonder when it was given to her?

In a wild medley of confusion, arguments came and went in her mind as she sat there. What did other women do in like situations? She glanced round the table, trying to read the blandly attentive faces of the other women. Impossible to tell. Their inner emotional lives were hidden in the fastness of propriety—they were English women; now if they had been French, for instance. . . .

Cicely began to be astonished at the thoughts which welled, almost gushed into her head, as if some secret spring had let them loose. Anne . . . should she confide in her? . . .

After the meeting, when they were drinking tea in a babble of noise, Lady Harvey came to her.

"My dear, it's splendid, the way you're helping us

like this. I'm so grateful to Miles for bringing you to us, you can't think. I must arrange another theatre party for you and him before he goes away."

"Going away? Is he going? When? Where?"

Frantically she tried to control her voice, foolishly aware that Lady Harvey had noticed her agitation.

"Well, he generally goes away in August or September—like most people. We've been rather worried about him lately, he looks so tired. My husband thinks he burns the candle too much at both ends. He looked really ill on Tuesday night."

Cicely gathered her wits. She wanted to go on talking about Miles.

"Oh, yes, a wedding party, wasn't it? He told me about it. By the way, whose wedding were you celebrating?"

A tiny silence, like a drip of ice-cold water, while Lady Harvey contemplated Cicely's smooth, free face and clear eyes, unusually bright. With considered care she told her:

"Ursula Carstairs—a very old friend of Miles and ours too. It's very sad, she's married a South African, so we shan't see much of her."

With a new-born intuition, Cicely grasped the fact that Lady Harvey was afraid of saying too much. She was being careful. But she must know more. Tact flying to the winds, she asked bluntly:

"Is that the girl whose photograph Miles has in his drawing-room?"

"Yes, my dear, it is." Then, gently: "He was engaged to her for years, you know."

"You mean—her marriage was a blow to him," Cicely said heavily.

Someone was digging their elbows into her side in a scramble to reach sandwiches. Her tea-cup rattled in its saucer as her arm received a severe jolt. The words jerked themselves out between her teeth:

"Then why didn't he marry her?"

Lady Harvey was puzzled and a little taken aback by her deliberate insensitiveness—Cicely could see it all flickering over the delicate but shrewd face.

"Well, I think it was really a question of money," she said now with gentle determination.

Cicely plunged still deeper, caring little now if she was approved of or not.

"But surely he has enough if he really wanted to marry—I mean, he isn't dependent on his father's money, is he?"

She knew she wanted Lady Harvey to say it was because he didn't really care for Ursula—didn't sincerely want to marry her, and so had made money the excuse. A dreadful sensation mastered her—not so much jealousy as fear—fear of this girl who had held him for so long.

Now Lady Harvey looked quizzically at her. She was at least realizing her state. Never mind, thought Cicely, let her. She didn't care as long as she knew all about Miles.

"Oh yes, I think he makes plenty for an ordinary life in London, but you see poor Ursula is delicate. The doctors have been urging her to live abroad for years, and I imagine the idea was that if he inherited his father's money they would go and live abroad altogether."

"You mean, throw up his work here?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I didn't know," her voice was low, "I didn't know all this. I seem to have upset a good deal."

A soothing voice. "My dear, you asked me to tell you. But you must realize, you're only an instrument. Old Mr. Crispin was a dogmatic old man. I hope—I think—Ursula will be very happy with Ivan and . . . as for Miles. . . ."

"Yes?" breathed Cicely. "What about him?"

"Well . . . with a man it's different, isn't it? Anyway I've always thought he was a born bachelor—some men are, aren't they? Not really suitable for married ties."

Cicely thought grimly that that wasn't a very comforting idea either, as she heard her name being murmured by the President, who desired to introduce her to so-and-so and so-and-so.

Lady Harvey, thankful to escape, slipped away and pondered, as she was driven home, how it was that Miles managed to turn quite nice, gentle women into veritable dragons of inquisitiveness and acquisitiveness. Ursula was the only one who could really manage him and now that was gone . . . what now? Cicely? What was he driving at? It was a difficult situation, not unmixed with irony, but she doubted if he would see the intricacies of it, or if he did he might prefer to remain blind to them and just be amused. Molly was really fond of him too. She sighed. Miles was a dear, but a difficult, obtuse and reckless one, where his emotions were concerned; although clever, almost brilliant, in other directions. No, on the whole she would not appreciate him as a son-in-law.

When Cicely reached the flat and found Miles had not rung up, that Colin and Anne were both out and that

Jim had telegraphed to say he would not be back that night, she subsided into a deep gloom. Lady Harvey had given her much food for thought.

Poor Miles, poor darling, she had robbed him of everything—his money and his girl. She must try to make amends—it was only fair—by giving him friendship and . . . She paused, all ideas of fair play and nobility banished by the thought of Ursula. Did he still care for her? Was that why he looked tired? Then why make love to another woman? He'd been so sweet last night. And going away—he hadn't told her about that. She sighed and rang the bell. She'd have dinner. A cocktail first to cheer her up.

The flat was in an upheaval. Enid Faulkner had begun operations. The drawing-room was to have beige leather walls, with diffused light from the ceiling—that apparently was to be of cedar wood; or was it leather, too, of a lighter shade? She couldn't remember. Anyway Enid had said it would be a simple super-background for her colouring and quite original.

As she ate her dinner, the impulse to telephone to Miles overcame her to such an extent that she surprised Bennett by getting up and going to her bedroom. She felt it was imperative for her to speak to him, to make quite sure that last night wasn't a dream. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she gazed at the jade green instrument and struggled to overcome this hysterical mood; uncertainty, doubt, then reassurance battled for a place in her mind. Dignity—she must, she would, preserve that. Self-control. It paralysed her at last into inaction. If only she hadn't gone to the meeting and hadn't talked to Lady Harvey, she would still be happy as she was this morning.

Her thoughts went to the women of the committee meeting. They were now doubtless eating, presiding at their own dinner tables or being perfect guests at others', all sedate, well mannered, their footsteps deeply embedded in the ruts they and their husbands had so carefully made. It was the kind of life to which she really belonged.

The telephone burred at this instant. Hope rising, she listened and asked: "Who's that?"

"Cicely," came the answer, "I must see you to-night. Lucky to catch you in. I know it's late, but come and dine."

Relief made her serene. She could afford to be casual.

"Why didn't you ring before? It's late now—eight o'clock."

"Been working. Look here, will you come?"

Impatience in his voice, demanding promptness.

"All right," she said, "I'll come. Where?"

"Pick me up at the flat. Don't change. Just want to talk. Don't be long."

She knew enough of men not to keep him waiting. Even at the risk of not looking her best, she hurried through her tidying. Lucky she'd left the car in the drive.

Half-past eight found her facing Miles in his drawing-room.

"That's fine." He looked weary; his manner was practical, almost brusque. "I'm so hungry. We'll go to a quiet place. Do you mind?"

Cicely had long since discovered that food was an all-important subject with Miles. Nevertheless, a chill wash of disappointment at his tone quietened her, for

she had not yet learned to cope with disappointment. Had he then completely forgotten last night?

They went to a small restaurant run on Continental lines. Tiny tables with blue and white striped tablecloths, wall sofas running round the entire room, good service, excellent food, no flowers, no music.

She responded to his mood to the extent of making up her mind and choosing quickly the dishes she wanted. The ordering over, he sat back, and, with one of his miraculous touches, restored her good spirits.

"Sorry, Cicely. Don't let me damp you, though . . . I'm tired and old and gloomy to-night, so be patient and. . . ." he lowered his voice. "I haven't forgotten last night—have you?"

"No, I haven't."

He covered her hand as it lay on the sofa. The contact brought back her confidence in him, herself and the world. As they ate their dinner, he told her about a case he was working on, difficult to follow. Happy just to be with him, she was a good listener and watched him with attentive eyes as he talked. There was something virile in his quick clear eyes and the sudden movements of his broad shoulders. No nervousness in the action of his hands and fingers either. Everything about him indicated decisiveness, quick resolutions, concentration on the matter in hand.

Cicely realized at last that she was being hurried through her dinner. Now over both of them there seemed to be an expectancy, an urgency. Miles was talking without enthusiasm as if he were marking time, filling in gaps. They had finished. The bill paid, they strolled to the door. Jermyn Street loomed narrow

and dusky. What now? He took her arm and they walked towards Piccadilly.

"I feel so rested with you, Cicely. A peaceful person, aren't you?"

"Why are you so worried and bothered?"

"Accumulation of work, I suppose. But I like it, you know. Inactivity to me is awful." His walk quickened at the thought.

"But what would you have done if the money had come in? There would be no need for you to work then."

He laughed. "You attack so directly, don't you? I'm afraid answers are not quite so simple as questions. How can one tell? 'Strong reasons make strong actions'—Shakespeare has it. But when the reason is removed, how does one know what one would do?"

She said tensely, determined to push: "In this case, I suppose your chief reason, shall we say, was the girl you were engaged to."

He looked at her sharply. "Oh, so you've heard about that?"

She nodded.

"The past is past." He took a deep breath. "We won't talk about it. The present is here. Cicely, don't be so serious. It isn't worth it. Put it all out of your mind."

So she was not to think, not to ask questions, not to try to understand the inner reaches of his mind. To-night he was far away from her, quite unlike the Miles of last evening. Would that moment ever be recaptured?

Her answer came when they were back in his flat and he took her in his arms and kissed her. To-night

she clung to him. At least her arms could enclose him physically, even if her spirit was not allowed to follow his. Perhaps her embrace told him of her longing. Abruptly he let her go and lit a cigarette. To her the whole room vibrated with unspoken words, meaning. She waited—standing by him, gazing at the almost imperceptible stripe in his dark blue coat, till it became a blur. She felt rather frightened, as if already the climax was reached.

He said slowly :

"Well, darling, what about it? Do you want this to go on?"

When she made no reply, he continued: "You see, it's for you to decide. There's no going back with this sort of thing. Either it leaves off—just where we are—or it goes on. One or the other. You've had time to think."

Facing facts like this had not been in Cicely's scheme of life—anyway she felt hard things like facts should not appear in a love affair. If only she could go to Jim and ask his advice. A slight smile quivered over her face at the thought.

She said: "It sounds so much like an ultimatum, Miles."

"You're not a coquette, Cicely. Thank God. I knew that from the first. You must know your own mind, you're not a child. Listen," he glanced at her doubtful, pale face, "I have gathered by this time that your husband doesn't like me. In a way it makes things easier for me—not to have met him."

She interrupted: "I'd never divorce Jim. Never. It wouldn't be fair."

He turned away. His face was invisible to her. She

could only see his broad back and fine hair. Give him up—let him go beyond her reach. And with him would pass all her new-found joy in life—the expectancy, the desire to experience, to exert her powers. Must she? But why should she? What was drawing her back, keeping her? Sense of duty to Jim? She was a separate entity—must her whole life, her emotions, her susceptibilities, be ruled by another because she had married him? All the old arguments over again. Like the swing of a pendulum they came and went in a remorseless rhythm. No help from anyone. She must decide. Again she reminded herself she had taken so much away from Miles. It was wonderful of him not to hint by word or action the part she had played in the breaking of his plans. Now he wanted something she could give. She would be making amends perhaps. So she told herself.

But Cicely, being completely feminine, really resented this scene which gave her no loophole for self-protection. If he had taken her into his arms and added gentle persuasion, interceded for himself, flattered her womanhood, her mind would have been made up for her. Afterwards she could have argued that she was not entirely to blame—she had been swept off her feet. Instead, he stood there, a barrister stating his case—no, her case—impartially, without passion.

She asked now: "You're not jealous of Jim?"

He turned and smiled. "No. Why should I be?"

Was he aware then how completely she was his? Not jealous of Jim. She was weaponless. Her very love for him and his knowledge of it made her defenceless, vulnerable.

"I must stick to Jim, I couldn't leave him," she repeated now. "You realize that?"

"Yes."

So completely at his mercy, and she longed for the rôle of the adored one dispensing her favours, making sacrifices, sparingly at first but gradually giving way as ardour increased, advancing, retiring, playing the whole gamut of feminine wiles. Why had she thought of it that way? You're not a coquette, he had said. She must not, she would not be one. She would meet frankness with frankness. She held his eyes.

"We could make each other happy," he told her. "And there's only one life, you know," he added warningly.

How often Jim had told her that women thought too much of the sex side of their affections, too much of the idea that they were bestowing a great and wonderful favour on a man when they were really only responding to nature's call. All very well from a doctor's point of view, but would a husband's be the same?

Wandering round the room she came face to face with Ursula's photograph. The wide, thoughtful forehead, the firm mouth, determined chin: she considered them for some moments.

"Are you still in love with her?"

Motionless by the mantelpiece, he answered:

"I don't know—I don't, honestly."

"Really, Miles . . . well, really. . ."

He crossed the room to her. "You don't understand, do you? Don't try, Cicely dear. It makes no difference to the fact that you're adorable, lovely and so very, awfully—attractive. There now, don't worry, darling . . . darling."

His caresses supplied the magic truth. Her head on

his shoulder, his arm round her, she felt secure, safe from all doubtful invasions.

"Miles . . . Miles," she whispered. "It's all so difficult . . . not easy as you think."

"I know . . . I know." He smoothed her flat, shining hair. "I won't bother you, dear. You must be free to act as you think best. But you know how I feel about you, don't you? Useless for me to argue——"

"But Miles, I love you. I can't help it. I've taken so much from you and I want. . . ."

"Hush, be quiet. Don't talk of that. It has nothing to do with it, nothing. This is just you and I. Outside influences must not count. We've said all there is to say about them during these weeks we've known each other. I know a lot about you, Cicely, and I can guess a good deal more. You've been stinted of everything, darling. Money, life, opportunity to expend your energies. You've got these now, but the chief thing is missing. Your world must be perfect. . . ."

So he could be sentimental too. Lulled to peace by his assurances, soothed by his endearments, she allowed herself to float on the crest of happy dreams. . . .

She stood with Anne next day gazing at a little ship with red sails proudly making its way on the glittering water of the White Stone Pond.

"Do you remember how you and Colin made a paper boat with my first Valentine and sailed it in the brook, and when I cried you told me you had sent it to me? I'd been thinking and hoping it was the boy staying at the Vicarage. When I was angrier than ever, you didn't understand."

"Yes—I remember. Mother sent me to bed as a punishment. But I understood quite well."

"Did you? At your age?"

"Yes."

Anne's mood was soft this morning. Her eyes, cloudy and warm, followed the red sail till it touched the edge of the pond and was claimed by its owner, a small boy with a stick.

"The water looks nice in the sun. It's going to be hot again," she observed.

Cicely seized her opening. One had to tread warily with Anne these days.

"Too hot for London. I thought this morning it would be a good idea to go to the sea—France perhaps—for a short time. We could go to a nice hotel. It wouldn't be a bit like the holidays we used to have in houses Jim and I used to take and you hated so much, smelling of wet linoleums and disinfectant! We could have people to stay."

"Yes—why not? Jim wouldn't come, though."

"No, I don't suppose he would drag himself away."

"Would Miles Crispin come?"

"Yes."

"I see."

So quiet, decisive came the answer. Cicely composed, indomitable.

"Is that wise?"

"Yes. I've made up my mind. Anne, dear—I can't help it. It must happen. You won't understand, you can't. Everything is in front of you—you're free. This is my only chance of happiness in a lifetime. I'm not going to let it harm Jim in any way, I've made up my mind to that—but it's my right."

The children around them playing in the sun, a flag flying lazily in the breeze. The low 'bus like a red lizard creeping along to Jack Straw's Castle. Cicely's voice had become tense with determination.

"Why do you always compare yourself with me? Our lives are different. The position is not the same."

"I know, I know. It's just that I want you to understand. I must have your help . . . to prevent scandal."

"You don't try to understand my position a bit." Anne told herself she was behaving monstrously. Blackmail—yes, it was a form of that. But why shouldn't Cicely be made aware of ugliness? Anyway, what she was going to say would merely be a test—a test of the extremes to which Cicely would go. "Not a bit," she repeated. "You wouldn't give me what I asked for the other day."

"What would you do if you had money of your own?"

"I could come and go when I liked—live where I want to and be free."

"Free of me, you mean?"

"Yes, I do mean that, I s'pose. Oh, I don't pretend I don't really like being here—I do. In some ways it's fun. And I don't want particularly to go back and waste my time doing nothing in the country; but it's awful to be dependent on you. For one thing I can't say what I really want to say. You've given me a taste of what it is like to have money, and any moment you can take it away. You must see how awful it is."

"You'll marry—in time."

"Marry to escape—follow your example, you mean."

"Anne dear, don't." Real pain in Cicely's face

now. She had succeeded in making her feel something at any rate. Then, the enormity of Anne's suggestion gradually dawning, she said:

"Are you really trying to tell me that, unless I settle money on you, you won't help me? Anne, what's come over you? What on earth's happened?"

"Nothing fresh. It's only that I see things clearer than you. Right from the start. I don't gloss over realities."

"You might even think it your duty to tell Jim," Cicely added thoughtfully, "Of course, you're joking. You couldn't do such a thing."

"Why are you so sure? Why are you so certain that everyone is going to fall in with your plans? In a way Jim might be happier for knowing. After all, he hates this life. He could do what he liked."

Anne, now thoroughly aroused, was talking in a low, angry voice. The unscrupulous self-satisfaction of Cicely's attitude was antagonizing in itself. Something must be done to stop it—someone must do it.

"Let's go and sit down on a bench and talk this over."

As they walked, Anne's words and their implication penetrated Cicely's mind. Jim did want her. It was nonsense to suppose otherwise. He relied on her for all his comforts, he trusted her, he loved her. Yes, she was certain of that. If she left him, his happiness, everything, would be destroyed. This scene, which was developing into something like a distasteful nightmare, with its dreadful recriminations and accusations, must be an interlude. Yesterday she had brimmed over with noble resolutions, desire to do what was best for everybody; and now, bit by bit, Anne was dissecting that desire and showing it up as worthless, unnecessary,

selfish. Miles—she longed for him now more than ever. With him she was not subject to these harsh, destructive criticisms.

“Don’t you see, Cicely?” Anne’s voice was again soft, persuading. The short walk had subdued her anger. “You must consider everything. This may be a plot to get your money. Miles may compromise you—then Jim might be forced to divorce you. You would marry Miles, and after all he gets his own money back.”

“You’re talking rot!” Cicely was not even ruffled at this suggestion. In fact she could afford to laugh at it. “And anyway, you wouldn’t mind. You said before I ought to give him his money back.”

“I wouldn’t say that now.” Anne had the grace to smile. “I rather like it. It helps a lot.” She leant forward. “Cicely, are you really in love with him?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I am, and I’d marry him to-morrow if it weren’t for Jim.”

“And does he want to marry you?”

Cicely hesitated, searching for the truth. “He knows I wouldn’t think of it—I told him so.”

“You—you of all people,” Anne murmured. “I didn’t think you would go to such lengths.” She pleaded: “Cicely dear, do be careful. You don’t know what you may be letting yourself in for . . . and Jim.”

Cicely crying—tears standing in great dewy drops in her eyes. . . .

“Anne, I’m so weak, I know . . . I’m not taking it all lightly—I couldn’t, I suppose it’s the way one has been brought up. Father would have thought it a dreadful thing . . . but I just can’t fight against it.”

"Poor old thing—I'm sorry." And when Anne said that, she was not thinking of the present but the future. She realized dimly that Cicely must take her chance. If she were persuaded now to cut Miles out of her life, always and forever there would remain, like a festering sore, a grudge against life, Jim, herself. Frustration bit into the very roots of one's existence, tarnishing all brightness, leaving one bare and bleak and irritable. Sacrifice was no good unless conviction was behind it, or enough courage to hide the lack of conviction. Cicely was too normal and obviously too conscious of self to stand such an ordeal without making everybody she came in contact with hostile or miserable.

And now quickly her thoughts jumped to Peter. Without knowing it, while she had been talking to Cicely, she had made up her mind about him. While she had been in London, she had built up some sort of defence against her weakness, helped by other interests and Cicely's money. She chose to call her youthful love for Ernest weakness. Still caring deeply, her feelings had however undergone a change. Where before she had chiefly considered her own groping demand for his love and all that it stood for, now she had come to understand that it was hopelessly unsatisfactory, endlessly disturbing, unless love was mutual, one side as great as the other.

She had not talked of Peter to Cicely. She said now softly :

"I'll stand by you, Cicely, and Jim too."

She was thinking to herself : "Life without love's a load—and time stands still."

And Cicely jolted her out of her thoughts by saying :

"I wish you could be happy too," and adding: "If I thought it would make you happier, I'd settle some money on you so you could be free; but you're so wild, you know, you must be safeguarded against yourself. Perhaps later. . . ."

"There she goes again," thought Anne. "Determined to remain in possession."

X

DAYS brimming with light and colour, nights warm and soundless, except for the croaking of frogs in the ravine leading down to the sea and an occasional footstep of a late-comer on the cobbles outside the hotel. Short nights—they were broken at daybreak by Monsieur's voice shouting instructions to Alphonse the waiter, who spoke broken Cockney English to the visitors. Monsieur's words in themselves were completely friendly, but the manner in which they were delivered made one think a terrific quarrel was imminent.

As the first tone of Monsieur's voice broke into Cicely's consciousness, the thought came over her—a day less—another day gone. Days of delight and vivid, live happiness, only tinged with misery and torture in these early mornings when she woke to the fact that time was slipping by—Miles' time. She had tried once to say what was in her mind—that if he really loved her he wouldn't tear himself away, friends or no friends. It was when they were on their way back from seeing a château. Miles was possessed of a questing spirit, she had discovered. To remain stationary for long, sitting by the sea or reading in the sun, was impossible to him. He wanted to see and discover fresh places.

She had ventured ; her hand in his :

"Why must you go to Spain, if you like it here ? You could make some excuse to your friends."

"No, I must go." His voice was gruff with finality. "We fixed it up months ago, before you came along. We've booked rooms and everything. The tour's marked out."

"Do you want to go?"

"Darling, it's not wise to ask questions like that."

The one reproof she had had since their holiday started, but enough to act as a warning. So sure of herself and her love for him, she longed to probe the depth of his—and find it immeasurable in its intensity. When she was with him, her life was complete, so complete that all doubts were banished. She gave him, with her love, tenderness and sympathy, and tried desperately to understand him. He gave her during those sunshiny days by the sea flattering attention, sympathy to equal her own, and exquisite hours of contentment: but entire absorption—no. Dimly she began to realize the presence always of that spirit of adventure, that desire for freedom, which set his mind winging independently at unexpected moments over a sphere, perhaps of his past life, perhaps of his own imagination, where she could not follow.

He told her of his childhood, spent in nursery schools, while his parents were in Australia. Then Winchester, Oxford and holidays spent on a farm in Wales with distant cousins. He had learnt at an early age to think and do for himself, to barricade his emotions within. His reserves were impenetrable. In the long grass, studded with tiny wild flowers, they lay staring at the sea, blue and tumbling in the sun.

"Oh, Miles—if only this could go on! To have to go back to London and . . . I'm so happy here—I've never been so happy in my life."

For the first time he mentioned Jim. He said :

"Jim will be wanting you back."

"Yes. . . ."

"You like that, don't you ? Being wanted, I mean."

"It depends. By some people—yes."

"But you're fond of Jim."

"I suppose I am. I feel responsible for him. But I love you—I belong to you. I never felt like this about Jim."

"Darling—how sweet." He moved his big body restlessly and lay on his side staring at her. "But don't love me too much—it's a mistake to care for anybody too much, it destroys happiness."

"How can it ? Aren't you glad I love you ?"

"Funny person, aren't you ? Of course I'm glad—but I'm really not worth too much consideration."

"Miles, how can you say things like that ?"

The unhappiness and perplexity in her face made him say quickly :

"Well, don't let's bother now. Let's make the best of the present."

"When we're both back in London we'll meet often, won't we ?"

"As often as possible. But I shall be very busy next term. And you'll have a lot to do."

Suddenly she asked ; "What do you think of Anne ?"

"Well, quite frankly, she frightens me a little—but then, so do all modern young things. They're so relentless in their determination to accept facts and face them. Their common-sense is appalling."

"But Anne isn't really very modern—she's only go a wash of it, that's the trouble. She's romantic and sentimental at heart."

"She's just at war with herself," he said quietly. "But she's very pretty and attractive. She dislikes me, so it's hard for me to judge her."

"How fair you are," Cicely said, and decided not to say more about Anne. After all, Anne and her problems were family matters; it was hardly just to discuss them outside—even to Miles.

Anne and Colin were quite content with the arrangement of their holiday. They spent long hours bathing and fishing and walking. Colin was sunburnt and coughed less. He liked Miles and said so to a somewhat sceptical Anne.

"He's so alive. He's got a handicap of four, he's a jolly good tennis-player and everything. The only thing that puzzles me is——"

"Well, go on," Anne said.

"Is—it seems a rotten thing to say—is what he sees in Cicely. But I expect that's just because she's a relation. He will do her a lot of good, I should say. She's much nicer already."

"Where does Jim come in, then?" Anne asked curiously. Colin, when he aired his point of view, always intrigued her.

"I suppose he comes in where he wants to. After all, all the weight is on a husband's side—he's got the advantage and it's up to him to use it. I'm awfully fond of old Jim, but I do think he's a bit of a mutt sometimes."

Anne sighed. "I suppose so. Still, it's nothing to do with us really. Let's go and have an *apéritif*."

They sat in the cobbled courtyard and Alphonse brought them vermouth cassis in long glasses and lots of ice. Anne threw off her bathing-wrap to allow the sun to burn her skin to its heart's content. She said dreamily :

"Everything is much more peaceful and pleasant when there aren't any men about to fall in love with. I like being with you—alone."

He grinned. "That's why I'm here, I suppose—instead of Switzerland."

"When you go in the winter, I shall come too. At least, if Cicely lets me. That's chiefly why I want money of my own."

"The winter's a long time away."

She mistook his meaning. "Yes, we needn't think about it yet."

He hesitated and thought of the awful sweat he was in last night and a fearful feeling of tightness in his lungs and his heart beating as if it would burst. He didn't want to die—he wanted the glorious fresh air to work freely through his body, to be able to breathe it deeply, to be able to use his muscles without fear of strain. Perhaps the sweating was due to the sudden terror of death.

But it seemed unkind to leave Anne now. She didn't seem to realize the strict rules of sanatorium life, and that they couldn't be together if she did come to Switzerland. He wished she were happier. He didn't know what to do about her. Sometimes he felt like going to see Ernest Faulkner to ask his advice. She was estranged from Cicely, too, because, he supposed, Cicely was so taken up with Miles.

The ten days of Miles' visit passed. The night before he went, Cicely broke down. It was as if the pent-up emotions of a lifetime surged over her, drowning her self-control. They had walked out into the lane leading down to the sea. The rustle of it, like the whisper of blown silk, rose above the frogs' croaking.

"Don't go, Miles—oh, don't go! I can't bear it!"

She had tried so hard not to say the words she knew would make him impatient. Her arms clung to him nervously, pressing him to her so that she was hardly aware of his unresponsiveness.

He took her hands from his neck.

"Don't, dear, please. I might be going to the war or something. Instead we've had a lovely holiday—haven't we?—and now it's finished. You must be sensible."

"It all means so much to me, you know." Bitterness crept into her voice. "More than it does to you, I expect."

"No, darling, don't say things you'll be sorry for." His voice was tender. "Don't spoil our memories. Will you? You can go back and see how Jim is getting along, then you can go away again. Take Anne and Colin with you."

Away without him—couldn't he understand how lonely she'd be?

"It won't be the same"—she was like a small forlorn child deprived of a treat—"without you."

"Nonsense," he teased her out of her mood. "All flattering nonsense. It's getting chilly—you mustn't catch cold." He drew her light coat round her shoulders. "A baby, aren't you? We'll go and say good-bye to the bathing place, and then we'll go in."

"This time to-morrow you'll be far away. I shan't know where you are."

"I shall be fast asleep, I hope, in the train. And you'll be fast asleep in your little bed here. I'll allow you to dream about me, but you're not to stay awake and think. Promise?"

"No."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. Promises are made to be broken."

"Miles—you don't really think that, do you?"

She stood still and stared at him in the half-light.

"Well," he laughed softly, "let's say they're optional. After all, the mood they're made in passes, so why shouldn't they? I'm not talking of the kind when you give your word as a bond—but the other, the little kind."

"I think if a promise is made, it ought to be kept," she said with a frown. "It's no use asking you to promise to write, then?"

"Not the slightest." He was teasing again. "We'll both write if we feel like it, but it's too much of a tie for either of us to be forced to write because of that silly word—promise. I'm a rotten letter writer anyway."

Hopeless to try to pin him to anything. She gave it up. Wisely she lost herself in him and shut out the future for his remaining time.

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She went to Dieppe with him to see him off and when she came back to the hotel the blank sense of loss was almost unbearable. He had gone gaily, not once showing any real regret at having to leave her, and yet his charm, his tender love-making, his teasing sympathy enveloped her in a cloud of happiness. And now that he was gone, it was as if her whole purpose of living had been removed. It would be a question of marking time till she saw him again. She thought, this is real love. Until these last ten days I haven't lived. All my childhood, all these years with Jim have been a

kind of semi-existence, and if he stops loving me I don't want to live.

They had finished lunch and were sipping strong black coffee under the veranda on the edge of the cobble stones. Anne offered her more sugar and then suggested she should lie down. She had shown by many little considerations that she sympathized with Cicely. Cicely was thinking: this time yesterday we were all laughing at the kitten tucked up in the pram and being wheeled about by little François, and Miles took it in his arms when it was frightened and soothed it. He was so gentle with it.

In the distance the sea shone blue. The scent of clover drenched the air. Colin and Anne had not mentioned Miles since he went. The curious part of the whole affair now to Cicely was that she did not care what they thought of her; she was numbed to the opinions of anyone but Miles.

"Now go upstairs to your room and I'll get you an aspirin," Anne was saying. "Then you'll be fit tonight. Some travelling players are coming to the hotel, Monsieur told me. They're sure to make an awful din."

"What are you going to do?"

"Bathe, I expect, and sunbathe." Anne looked across and saw the fear of being lonely and miserable in Cicely's eyes. "Sleep's lovely on a day like this—I say, here's the postman."

Hot and sweating, the little fat "facteur" dismounted from his rusty bicycle and came towards them. Clips kept his bulky trousers tight round his ankles, but he had pulled his Peter Pan shirt collar out over his coat

and strung a big white handkerchief under his "képis" as a gesture of reproof against his Government's idea of summer clothes for their postmen. His eyes beamed at them from under shaggy eyebrows as he passed the time of day.

"Any letters for Simpson or Ferguson?"

There was one for Cicely addressed in her mother's strong writing. Colin and Anne subsided into a drowsy stillness when they found there was nothing for them. Anne wondered vaguely where Peter was. She'd heard nothing since they came away, and they had settled nothing. He talked of cruising in the Mediterranean in his uncle's yacht. She hadn't thought about him much since she'd been here, being quite content to drift through the days with Colin. Peter belonged to the outside world, but when she got back, she wanted—yes, very much—to pick up the threads where they had dropped them.

"Well," said Colin lazily, "what's the latest news of the ramblers, and does mother approve of the new chicken houses you've given her? Do you remember—the very day you heard about your money we were discussing those houses and wondering if we could run to them? Thank the Lord I'm not coping with them any more. That is better." He held his face up to the sun.

Cicely finished the letter and let it drop to her lap. She sat staring out at the sea.

"Can I look?" Anne reached over to take up the closely written sheets. "I say, what a lot!"

Cicely's hand closed over them. "No, I wouldn't, dear, if I were you. Read it later—there's nothing much in it."

"Why ever not? Besides, mother's long letters about nothing are just right for an afternoon like this."

Colin, his eyes on Cicely, said: "Come on, Anne. If we're going to have that bathe, we'd better go before the tide goes down."

"Yes, do. I'm going up to rest." Cicely, all haste now, gathered up her things and went indoors. Anne, with a shrug, linked her arm in Colin's and they went down to the sea.

When they came back, the sun was setting, shedding its liquid golden light over the rocky cliffs and the village nestling behind. Anne, her damp hair glowing chestnut, her skin a golden sherry-brown in the light, walked carelessly, allowing her towelling-cape, worn because of the rigid rules of the local authorities, to flow back from her figure. Her bathing suit was still wet.

When they were within sight of the hotel, someone shouted. They blinked in the sun and could see nothing. Then suddenly by their side was Peter—Peter in immaculate flannels, his smooth curly hair in place, his dark blue coat sleek and well fitting. He threw an arm round each of them.

"Don't," cried Anne, "I'm wet and filthy with mud and not fit to touch."

"Who cares?"

"I do." Her lips curled in derision. "We're not used to beach lizards here, are we, Colin? Or millionaire yachtsmen. We're leading a quiet, simple life."

"Which you don't want disturbed. I see. Okay." Peter looked sullen and addressed himself to Colin:

"I got your letter, and the old man is staying at Dieppe, so I thought I'd just run over and look you up."

Colin felt angry with Anne. What the dickens was the matter with her? You'd think she'd be pleased to see Peter.

"I'm damned glad to see you, Peter," he said. "Do stay to-night. There's going to be a binge at the pub. Travelling players or something."

"Why don't you come over to Dieppe and dance?"

Colin looked at Anne.

"No," she said firmly. "I can't leave Cicely." They had come to an impasse.

Colin went on impetuously: "Do stay the night. It's not bad—quite comfortable."

Anne intervened harshly, seeing Peter's hesitation.

"Can't you see he doesn't want to, Colin? He's probably got lots of friends at Dieppe."

"It's not that—exactly." Peter kicked a stone. "Only I promised to be back and——"

"Exactly." Anne's voice was triumphant. "Don't bother to explain, we quite understand. I'm going to get some clothes on."

She disappeared into the hotel.

"What's the matter with her?" Colin asked anxiously. "She was quite cheery just now. Can't you do something, Peter?"

"It's just me—I expect. How the hell does she guess Harmony's in Dieppe? I bet you anything she does."

"Does she? And even if she is, why should Anne mind?"

"That's just what I wonder."

Anne dressed slowly, perversely dawdling, wondering at her own resentment against Peter. It's always a disadvantage to be caught dirty and dishevelled by a

person who looks just the opposite. On top of that, to be quite determined to go away as soon as possible, as Peter seemed to be, was just insulting, especially as one of Harmony's red handkerchiefs quite blatantly peeped from his coat pocket.

She brushed her hair furiously, put on a pair of well-cut dark blue beach trousers and a tailored shirt, and presently went down.

"Hullo—still here?"

Peter smiled insolently. "Rudeness is encouraging—rather flattering, in fact. Go on, Colin, tell me some news."

"I don't know any. We've been buried here—loving it."

"Haven't you heard anything about the usual crowd at all?"

"No—why?"

"Nothing much." He looked at Anne's assumed indifferent expression. "Come and try 'Squibs,' Anne. I've only just got her and she's running well."

"No," said Anne. "I want to be quiet. I'm sick of being hectic."

Colin said he would go and see how Cicely was faring, and disappeared. Anne stared at Peter's white flannels. Peter examined the creases carefully.

"What's the matter with them?"

"Nothing. They're perfect—too perfect, that's all."

"It's your state of mind, my child. Anything happened, or just boredom?"

"Neither." They smoked in silence.

"Never seen you before in trousers. Rather shattering."

"Never knew you so polite."

"Oh hell, Anne! shut up."

"Ha—at last."

She sat straight up in her low chair and examined him with fascinated interest.

"We are amused, it seems."

"Very. I've been waiting for you to say that ever since I met you. So good at chit-chat and small-talk, aren't you, darling? Such an able retort, too—completely devastating."

"You appear to have travelled some since then. No more simple country maiden about you."

"No? And it's all due to you—just think—and your lot. You're very expert at boiling, aren't you? You do the job thoroughly."

"What do you mean?"

"You've made me hard-boiled, all right. And I'm glad. I'm grateful. So there!"

"Vot a wumman."

"Exactly," she answered inadequately.

The sun disappeared quite suddenly and left a silvery world behind it. Anne's long legs encased in their trousers extended themselves luxuriously.

"I'd like another drink," Peter ventured gruffly.
"Will you?"

"No, thanks, we're just going to have dinner." Her meaning was pointed, but he made no move to go.
"And I must go in and put on a skirt." She made a grimace. "For Cicely's sake, you know—her conventions."

"Why not for your own?" He gave her a sharp look as she untwined herself from her chair. Now she stood before him.

"In the matter of conventions, my angel child, I am

as a new born babe—extremely naked—stripped of them. Your world has done the unstripping.”

“Is that true?”

“I never tell a lie. That’s not a convention either—merely self-indulgence. Lies make one uncomfortable. Good-bye. I don’t suppose I’ll see you again before you go back to Dieppe.”

“Bye-bye,” he said casually. “Good huntin’.”

She paused. “What do you mean?” Her voice was defiant.

“Well, when people make a statement like you made just now about ridding themselves of clinging, hampering things like conventions, it generally means they’re on the war-path.”

“Oh!” At the door of the hotel, she turned her head and laughed at him.

“And why not?” she called.

Peter stayed to dinner. They ate mussels, and mushroom omelette, and ris-de-veau with beans swamped in butter, washed down with some vin du pays recommended personally by Monsieur, in the little bare, scrupulously clean dining-room.

Cicely, pleased to see Peter, speculated as the meal went on as to his feelings about Anne. They were healthily rude to each other, in fact so robustly full of gibes and repartee that it was impossible to imagine any tender passages between them. She did nothing to entertain Peter, but sat back quietly to listen. Her thoughts went back to the Anne she had talked to the day the letter came, telling her she was rich. She remembered so well that determined: “I shall always love Ernest.” Anne had changed since then—outwardly at any rate. To-night she shone with life and

vitality. There was a glitter in her russet eyes and she was exceedingly funny in the aptness and sophistication of her remarks. She ought to marry Peter, of course; or if not him, she might think of marrying someone after she had read mother's letter. . . .

Fruit and liqueurs next. Then the whine of a violin being tuned in, the excited undertone of voices, the low rumble of chairs being moved.

"They're getting ready," Colin said. "There's going to be a conjurer, a violinist, a singer, and all sorts of thrills, all for a few pence. But let's go and sit outside till they're ready. What a pity Miles missed it—he'd have adored it."

"Who's Miles?" Peter demanded.

Cicely, blushing, hastily put in: "A friend who came to see us. He went yesterday."

"I see. By the way, there was a bit in the paper about your husband, Mrs. Ferguson. Something about some research work he's doing."

"Is there? Which paper? I wonder how it got in."

"I can make a pretty good guess. Enid Faulkner's a whale at nosing out things, and she hands them on to some of her journalist paragraph-writer friends—for a consideration, of course. You know the sort of thing. 'Pretty Mrs. Ferguson, who was lucky enough to inherit a large fortune quite unexpectedly, has a clever and talented doctor husband. He spends his life working in the cause of humanity and his latest line . . .' and so on. And then a bit about where you live and your delightful flat ingeniously and beautifully decorated by that fashionable artist, Enid Faulkner."

"But it's awful," Anne said uneasily. "It might do Jim a lot of harm. You know what the medical

profession is like, they hate publicity, and poor old Jim will be absolutely plagued by interviewers. He'll be furious, won't he, Cicely?"

"Yes, I s'pose he will." Cicely came down to earth.

"What a lot of trouble that woman makes. I wish I hadn't let her do the flat."

Anne crimsoned. Then, realizing that Peter was aware of her discomfiture, she snapped:

"You had a reason, hadn't you?"

"Yes—but I'm not sure it's done much good."

"Why do you say that?" Anne saw now that Cicely knew something. Her mind flew to her mother's letter. So that was it. Cicely, so bad at subterfuge, could hide nothing. However she didn't want to discuss Ernest in front of Peter. She said:

"I wonder which paper it was in—about Jim."

"I don't know. I didn't see it, but I heard there was quite a lot. Has he started on a fresh line yet?"

"Yes," Colin said, "He had, and he's terribly keen. I should imagine it'll take all the kick out of it for him if he gets the limelight of the press on to it at this stage. He hasn't said anything about it in his letters."

Peter looked serious. "As a matter of fact, I'd got an idea he was over here with you."

"What made you think that?" Cicely's voice was sharp and Peter looked shy, as if he wished he hadn't spoken.

"Oh, nothing really. One of old Vivienne's buyers was on the 'plane you came over in. She knows you. You were wearing one of their models—professional pride and that sort of thing, you know, and they're very inquisitive, those breed of people. The man who was

with you was discussed, and they jumped to the idea that it was Jim."

Anne nodded. "And she told Vivienne all about it, and Vivienne handed it all on to Enid Faulkner and Mrs. Rushlip—I know. They're very curious and a bit peeved because they've never met Jim. In fact, they're quite prepared to believe he doesn't exist."

"Anne!"

"It's true, Cicely dear. Still, I don't know why we're talking about it. They don't matter. Let's go outside."

In spite of the warmth, Cicely said she must fetch a wrap. An odd sensation tugged hard at her: fear, premonition, anxiety. So silly of Colin to let Miles' name slip out like that. It was not at all certain that Peter could be trusted. She went to her room and opened the window wide and thought of Miles. "Asleep in your little bed," he had said. She wondered where he was now, whom he was dining with, if he was thinking about her. Last night by the window he'd taken her in his arms in the darkness and told her how adorable she was. Something in his tone had made her say: "You don't think I'm a light creature, do you, Miles, because of this? Please say you don't."

"Of course not, my sweet, how foolish!" And he had kissed her doubts away. But if Enid Faulkner found out she had been staying here and that Miles was in the party, that was how she would be talked of—they would be only too glad to be able to think of her as a "light spark."

Colin knocked and came in. "Cicely, may I read mother's letter?"

"Of course, dear. I want you to. I suppose I

shall have to show it to Anne. Tell me what you think. . . .”

Anne and Peter walked down to the sea in silence. When they reached the rocky beach, Peter said:

“What’s the matter, child. Won’t you tell me?”

He looked down on the top of her head as she sat on a low rock nursing her knee. Suddenly her resentment against him vanished. She began to talk, pouring out her thoughts for the first time for months.

“It’s everything, Peter dear. You won’t grasp it, though. You live a different sort of life and you’ve been brought up to it. You see, I quite liked living at home. I adored the country, and I didn’t mind the littleness of it or being hard up. You know—but you don’t, of course—trifles are so important there, small things count so much, especially with a garden. And you can dream and let your thoughts wander. In London, you haven’t time to think—you have to be doing all the time, be busy spending money, and the small things are done for you. And the awful part about it is that I’ve got used to it now and I’ve lost my independence. You see, when you don’t have to think of money as a necessity for enjoying yourself, you’re free, you rely on yourself. Now the kind of life we live simply demands money, and to get it I have to ask Cicely. So you see I’ve become more or less a slave and I don’t know what to do about it. Of course, I could go back to live with mother, to see if I should settle down again, but it would be difficult.”

“Difficult because you’re trying to forget something—someone?”

“Yes—I s’pose that’s it.”

"What you said before dinner about throwing conventions to the wind—is that true?"

She laughed now and threw back her head. "No, Peter dear, it's not true yet—but it may be some time."

He tucked his warm hand round her neck. "You're a moody little thing. Still a frightened rabbit? Well, ducks, what about it?"

"What about Harmony?" she asked steadily.

"Oh—she insisted on coming along."

"And if I said 'yes,' what would you do about her?"

"Give her up, of course."

"And when you got tired of me, you'd give me up?"

"Or the other way round—you might get tired of me."

"I might."

She remained quiet for a long time. Mystified by her new strange manner, he said at last:

"We'd have such fun together."

Fun—the beginning and the end of life as Peter saw it. Directly fun waned in one direction, it must be sought elsewhere. Cicely's devastated white face swam before her eyes. Was it just fun with Miles too?

"No," she said loudly, "No, Peter, I couldn't bear it." She got up and turned to him. "I couldn't keep it up, dear. I couldn't go on being amusing. Don't you see? I'm not made like that. I should fizzle out, become a wet."

"Well, everybody does in time," said Peter. "You're too young to take life so seriously—you must experiment."

Her laugh was almost a sob. "Experiment—there was a song called that, wasn't there? But I haven't the courage, yet. Oh, Peter dear, I'm so lost."

"Poor lamb! Well, never mind, let's leave it, forget

it. I dare say something nice'll turn up for you. You'll find your feet."

Already he was bored, hating anything approaching unhappiness. She could see it in the way he half turned his back. This obviously was not his idea of an evening's amusement.

"Yes," she said wanly, "we'd better go and hear those people sing. Come on."

He caught her by the shoulders roughly. "Silly kid, aren't you? And I want to love you, no end. And you like kissing me quite a lot, don't you? Then why?"

"Listen." Desperately she held his head between her hands. "You're a stupid, blind idiot. Can't you see I like you too much to make a kind of drug of you? That's what it would be, use you to make me forget—other things."

Now he was kissing her throat and mouth, scarcely listening to her, lost in the consciousness of her nearness.

"Don't, Peter—please." That awful weakness, so undermining in its intensity, was taking possession of her limbs. "I don't want you to."

"But I do—I want you so much—I don't think I knew how much. It isn't all sex, either." He wrapped her round with his arms and laughed unsteadily. "There's something about you that gets me. Suppose we married—would that be a good idea, do you think? Would that square things up for you?"

"Be married—you? But you hate the idea," she said violently. "You loathe being tied. I can't imagine you married, Peter, can you?"

"No," he laughed again. "I hadn't thought of it till this moment—seriously, I mean. But it might work with you and me. Anyway, the old man wants me to

do something about it. Since Jack and Tom were killed, he thinks I'm important—from the family point of view, I mean. You know, his mind runs on heirs and nuisances like that."

Peter actually shy now, being rather sweet in his sincerity.

"And you think I'd fill the bill." She eyed him seriously. "You think they approve of me? I'm not very experienced, you know."

"That's just it, that's just why."

"Virginity in your wife is recommended, then." It was hard to keep the mockery from her voice, but he detected it and immediately became sullen.

"You really are a little beast." He hurt her with the push he gave her. "You make fun of everything."

At any rate, she thought, life with Peter wouldn't be filled up with cold reasoning, quiet tolerance and efforts to understand; it would be straightforward and quarrelsome and eager.

"Well, don't you think it's rather funny?" Her eyes, enormous in the moonlight, met his. "You do your best to make me say I'd like to be seduced by you, and then, because I say 'no,' you think I'd be a suitable wife."

"Well, why not?" he demanded sulkily. "It's reasonable enough."

"Oh, lord." She gave it up, found her handbag and lit a cigarette. Peter stood indecisively looking at the ground, then he made a quick movement, pulled the cigarette from her fingers, flung it away and shook her backwards and forwards till she was almost breathless. It was all so unexpected that when he had finished, she stayed speechless.

"Make up your mind," he said, his fingers still dug in her shoulders. "Are you going to sleep with me to-night, here, now, or are you going to wait a week or two till we've been told we can by the Church and our parents?"

"I can't tell you now, Peter dear," she said gently. "I really and truly can't. There's something I must do first."

"You mean, you want to see Ernest Faulkner?"

"Yes, that's it. I thought you'd guessed."

"I don't mind that, only you'd better hurry up about it. By the way, have you seen him lately?"

"Why, no. Not since I came to London. He's been down in the country all the time."

"But that makes no difference. Why haven't you met?"

"Because I made up my mind to forget him."

"Then why see him again?"

"I want to make sure."

"Sure of what?"

She hesitated a long while. "I must make certain he doesn't want me."

"Oh!" He paused. "Listen, Anne. There's something I want you to promise. I'm not likely to ask you to promise anything else. It's this: if we marry, will you say you'll never make any effort to see him again?"

"Yes, of course. That's only fair."

"All right. Now kiss me properly."

She raised her lips obediently.

"You don't even know how to kiss. But it'll be fun teaching you." The exultant, triumphant male was

speaking. He's very certain, Anne thought, as they went through the ravine. I wonder why.

A Punch and Judy show was gripping the audience in the small room running alongside the cobbled courtyard. The air, thick with smoke and the smell of leather boots, seemed to hit them in the face as they went in. Peter put his arm round Anne's waist and pulled her against the wall as they listened to the raucous voices from the tiny stage. Presently they were lost in the furious clapping of hands. Next, an underdressed young woman took the centre of the stage and in a surprising clear voice sang a song telling of love forsaken. With bent head and body drooping, she half whispered, half sang the words. "Il est parti, l'amour est mort."

Anne looked for Cicely, and at last discovered her fair head among a sea of dark ones. As the song finished, she saw her glance desperately round, and, with queer jerky movements, make her way between the rows of villagers to the door.

"What's the matter with her?" Peter asked.

"I don't know. I must go and see."

"No—don't. This is going to be snappy. I've never seen a show like this. What made you choose this place?"

"It's quiet, and we wanted a peaceful holiday."

"You mean, Cicely wanted it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Nothing."

"Peter, you must tell me. It's important. They've been gossiping, I expect. I thought so, by your manner at dinner."

"They have a bit. Enid Faulkner's the worst. She is extraordinarily interested in you, you know, and I'm

not surprised. But they can't harm you or Cicely, I shouldn't bother."

"They could harm Jim," she said slowly. "You weren't the essence of tact, either, when you said you thought he was here. Did you think so?"

"I thought so, but Enid didn't. She's been pottering about in your flat, and I expect she found signs of Jim's presence."

"He's staying at the Club while we're away, but he's probably been there. Don't ask me anything about Cicely, Peter. I don't want to talk about her."

"I can see that."

"You are a pet," she said under her breath. She felt already the comfort of having a strong ally.

Clapping, like hailstones on the roof, broke out again and she took the opportunity to slip away. "You stay," she whispered to Peter. "I'll come back later."

Cicely was in her room, sitting by the window. Anne said, as she stood beside her, her eyes on the moon:

"Peter wants me to marry him."

"Are you going to? I hope you are."

"I'm not sure. I haven't made up my mind. He only asked me because I refused to be his mistress."

"I hate that word," Cicely murmured. "Why do you use it?"

Anne almost laughed. Then, seeing she was serious, she said:

"Well, it's the right word for the right thing." She was being intentionally cruel, and she ought to be kind. Why did Cicely always arouse her worst feelings?

"I don't think of myself like that," Cicely said now. "Miles and I would marry. It's just my loyalty to

Jim that keeps us from it." Then she said: "Do you love Peter?"

"I'm awfully fond of him and all that. Cicely, I must see Ernest, I want to go back to-morrow," she burst out. "I can't decide till I've seen him. Surely you understand that?"

"I suppose so," Cicely said wearily. "You'd better read mother's letter first."

"Mother's letter? Yes, I'd forgotten it. Where is it?"

"Colin's got it in his room. He'll give it to you. I'm going to bed."

A sudden impulse made Anne bend down and kiss the smooth cheek by her side. "Don't be so miserable, dear, you'll see him again quite soon."

"It's the uncertainty of everything that's so awful."

"I know, I know." At that moment Anne was afraid for Cicely's future. She sought about for something to say. "But being in love is like that, it's a kind of torment, isn't it? It's the penalty, I suppose."

"Did you feel like this about Ernest?"

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I still do sometimes."

"But you've got Peter, now."

"I don't think anybody has ever 'got' anyone else, do you? I'm going now. I shan't come in again, dear. Have a good sleep."

She closed the door gently behind her. She read her mother's letter quickly, conscious of Peter waiting for her, while Colin prowled about his room.

"I'm so glad, dear, you're throwing yourself into charity work and not entirely wasting your time and money. Money, I often think, is like health. When you've got it, you don't notice it, and when you haven't

you pity yourself and make everyone feel uncomfortable. And so. . . .” Anne hastily turned over the page and the next, until the name she was looking for stood out boldly : “ I am so glad Anne is well and is enjoying herself and I hope so much she will meet some *nice* men. When dear Jim came to see me I could get nothing out of him. I thought he looked tired and dispirited and advised him to take glucose—such a fine pick-me-up. You know, dear, I always forget he’s a doctor—he’s seems to need as much mothering as an ordinary man. I wanted to hear all your doings, but he didn’t seem to want to tell me, in fact he scarcely seemed to know. Such a pity, I thought.”

Cunning old thing, thought Anne, a dig at Cicely. She read on :

“ Nothing has happened since you went away except, of course, the whole village is agog with curiosity over Ernest Faulkner’s domestic arrangements. *I’m so glad* he and his wife have made it up. She spends nearly every week-end here and has quite settled down in the cottage. Mrs. Clements reports she is a very nice mistress and really darns his socks beautifully (which is just as well—he has always had large potatoes in his heels whenever I saw him). She has been down a whole week this time. She rang up this morning to tell me she is re-decorating your flat for you and would like to come and see me, so I have asked her to tea. I am so glad about it all—somehow it creates a wrong atmosphere in the village and gives rise to gossip to have such a nice man, and handicapped by being an artist, living apart from his wife, and I am so thankful Anne didn’t get mixed up with him—I was so afraid of it, as you know. By the way, Mrs. Faulkner hinted that Anne had lots of

admirers, one especially. I *do* hope it's true. Every mother longs to see her children happy and settled. Really Mr. Crispin's money has turned out a boon after all. Now, dear, about Colin . . ."

She dropped the pages and met Colin's eyes.

"Pretty final," he said, "Enid's a determined hag."

"But why?" she said wildly. "I'm sure, absolutely certain, he doesn't want her there. He can't, Colin, not really. I can't understand it, can't imagine it somehow—her in the cottage, interfering, managing."

"Of course you can't. You only know him as he is now—you don't know what he was like when they were first married, what went on before. They must have had a link then, of some sort. He liked her once, obviously. She's hard up and she's jolly clever and knows how to manage men. Leaving him alone for a bit was probably part of her scheme. Now she's staged a come-back, pretty successfully it seems. And I dare say he was lonely and fed up and I know he felt it rather—being treated like a leper or an outcast by the village."

"He didn't mind a bit," Anne declared. "He's strong enough to rise above all that; besides, he could have gone to live somewhere else—somewhere more civilized, if he'd wanted to, instead of our silly little gossiping one-eyed village."

"In that case he's strong enough not to have Enid back if he didn't want her."

Defeated by her own arguments, Anne stood, wide-eyed, excited, rebellious, humiliated. In a flash she saw it all so clearly. Ernest never had really cared for her—he had merely been amusing himself. In her heart, all these months, she had carried the belief that

he would miss her—at least she hoped it might be so—and that when she went back, having tested herself and him, he might want her.

"We have to take our whippings and our kicks," he had said. Oh, yes, she remembered it all so clearly, the bright morning, his drawing-room and everything, when he had called it all "a little sentimental attachment." And all this time she had been a silly romantic little idiot, deliberately nursing her love for him, pretending to try to forget, instead of facing the fact. As bad as Cicely. It had been a "schwärmerei" on her part—a schoolgirl passion. She laughed, tears sparkling in her eyes.

"Oh, it's funny, Colin. Still, it's most suitable really, when you come to think of it. After all, Ernest is a selfish creature full of ego, and he can't be bothered, just that. I should be too much of a problem, a nuisance, and he hates being disturbed. He said all that, and I know it's true now. Enid will know how to manage him, as you said. I'm going to find Peter now. . . ." She stopped. "Good heavens, do you know, I believe Peter knew about them all the time."

"About who?" Colin asked stupidly.

"About Ernest and Enid—he was so sure. Nice of him not to tell me—but he must be laughing at me all the same."

Peter found himself being pulled from the heated room. "I say," Anne said breathlessly, when they had shut out the noise and stood outside, "let's be married soon."

"Any time you like." She was grateful for his completely unperturbed manner, but she knew he understood when he asked with a grin: "Are you going to ask the Faulkners to the wedding?"

"Are you going to ask all your girl friends?" she demanded in return, resolutely determined to show no weakness.

"Oh, shut up. You've got to be good now, or I shall spank you."

"Well, I'm going to bed," she said. "Do you know where your room is?"

"Yes, Monsieur showed me. Anne . . ."

"Yes?"

"Don't you want to be tucked up? I would like to, and now you've decided, it can't make any difference."

"It's not that, dear, only I'm so tired, and . . ."

"All right, have it your own way. Conventional little thing, aren't you? Well, night-night—blast you."

They kissed lingeringly under the moon and parted. Anne, strangely comforted, wandered slowly to her room. For a few seconds she stood, the door wide open, thinking of Peter and the advisability of burning one's boats and getting your own back on life, and lastly of Ernest.

In the end she shut the door firmly and went to bed.

XI

BACK in London, under Peter's guidance, Anne found the business of getting married a very simple and straightforward affair.

Cicely hankered after family meetings with parents of both parties solemnly gathered to inspect each other and advise the young, to disapprove or approve. Marriage settlements, trousseau choosing, bridesmaids, presents, flowers, hymn selections—the whole hotch-potch of a formal fashionable wedding. She had planned it in her mind directly Anne had told her the news. To that end they had packed up and come back to London at once. Such lots to be done had been the excuse.

To her amazement and regret she found the two hundred pounds she had given to Anne for her clothes spent in a day or two. Anne had faced Madame Vivienne : “I want this and that and those, they must be ready in six days.” And they were.

Lord and Lady Ingram, summoned to London by Peter, were presented to their future daughter-in-law in the foyer at Claridges. Lunch lasted an hour and a half, during which time Lady Ingram talked gardens and Lord Ingram politics and farming. Towards the end of the meal Peter announced casually : “Anne and I think it would be a good idea if we did it to-morrow week.” “Do what, dear?” Lady Ingram turned a benevolent countenance to her son. She was in the

middle of describing her dahlias to the really interested Anne.

"Get hitched up, of course. Will you both come? Don't bother if it's a bore. If you drop in at Henrietta Street Registry Office, you'll find us there."

Peter's father, fingering his whiskers, was apparently unaware of what it was all about, but Lady Ingram, her bright eyes catching Anne's shy ones, said: "Good gracious, Peter. What does Anne say to that—or isn't she allowed to speak?"

Anne faltered. It had been so easy the way Peter had put it. No real business of the old codgers. As long as he married a lady they wouldn't care, and if they did it wouldn't make any difference. The money was his own, and he wasn't a child and he'd lived his own life for so long. They'd like Anne to get along with them, of course, but it didn't really matter.

"It's her idea, too," Peter said, "She's not a nit-wit."

During the meal it had gradually been dawning on Anne that Peter was behaving badly to his people. They were full of tradition, set opinions, as to the demeanour and conduct of members of their own class. They did mind and care very much who their son married and were terribly fond of him, although bewildered by his way of living and his attitude. All this she had gathered during the impersonal chat about gardens.

Anne leant forward and spoke earnestly, responding to the anxiety she was aware of lurking in Lady Ingram's voice. "If you think it's too soon we won't—we'll wait. But you know we have known each other for quite a long time. Perhaps you think I'm not old enough—and," she swallowed with embarrassment, "you'd like to meet my mother and sister."

"My dear . . . it's not that . . . I know young people rush these things nowadays, Peter especially, only I had hoped for a wedding in church. I am sure Peter has made a good choice—very good indeed,"—she nodded reassuringly—"and I'm looking forward to showing you the garden, my dear, I think you'll like it."

"Quite . . . yes . . ." nodded Lord Ingram, "dear me, yes."

"Only you see," went on Lady Ingram, "we've waited so long to see Peter settled and now it's all so very hurried. I'm sure you understand, and we are so very anxious, aren't we John, that it should be a permanency. Divorce is so horribly frequent these days, it really makes one a little afraid."

"Waiting a month or two now can't possibly make any difference to our feelings in a few years' time," said Peter in a bored fashion. "Either way I can't be sure that Anne won't be sick of the sight of me by that time. She probably will, but if she has a brat or two to think of, she'll probably make up her mind to stick to me. Anyway I'm planning a long flying trip and Anne and I want to get settled in first."

"You see," Anne said, "London churches are so strange and queer. I'd like to be married at home, only it's so far and Peter can't spare the time at present. So we thought it would be much easier at a registry office—and Peter can't bear the idea of a big wedding and standing in the aisle waiting and all that."

Unexpectedly Lord Ingram put in: "Quite right, my boy. Weddings were meant for women, not men. I never felt such a fool in my life as when I——"

Peter's mother, realizing the odds were against her, said gently with a sigh: "Let me know, dear, when it's

going to take place, won't you? But it seems all wrong not to have the blessing of the Church."

"Of course I'll let you know," said Anne.

Peter sat staring vacantly at his wrist watch and Lady Ingram said hastily: "Well, I must go and choose my bulbs now I'm up in town. Much more satisfactory if you see the size for yourself—can't rely on gardeners. I hate London, you know," she added, "and I don't want to come again yet."

The party broke up.

"Lord," said Peter as they got into his car, "that's over. Shan't have to do anything about them for a bit. That sob stuff you put over about putting the thing off worked well with old Mums."

"But I meant it," Anne told him firmly.

"You didn't." He was pressing the starter.

"I did, and I think you're perfectly foul to your people."

"I think you're a sentimental little idiot."

"I believe you're cold and hard and callous," she said angrily. "You might stop a second and think of their point of view."

"I have thought of it, and considered, and know it to be useless. It just doesn't get you anywhere. Pottering and wasting time—their lives are made up of that," he said, impatiently. "You know that perfectly well."

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Anne had received a letter full of gladness from her own mother, who, in spite of all kinds of persuasions, refused to leave her cottage to come to London for the wedding. She disapproved strongly of the idea of a register office; it took her three pages of note paper

to say so. On the other hand, quiet satisfaction that Anne was marrying a young man of good family oozed from the whole. She made no mention of the Faulkners, and Anne, still in her determination to think bitterly of Ernest, did not speak of him to Colin or Cicely. It was Jim who made an indirect reference to him. He said to her when they were alone one day in his laboratory after he had met Peter:

"You go in for widely different types, Anne. The only similarity about them is their complete egotism. Anyway, I hope you'll be happy. That sounds a bit platitudinous, but I mean it."

She noticed how tired and worried he looked as he sat on a high stool, the glittering microscope in front of him.

"You don't approve, really and truly?" she asked.

"Well, I appreciate you're making a good marriage from Cicely's and your mother's point of view, but this young man of yours mixes with a queer crowd of people—mushroom people I think they are. All crying poverty and all shamelessly battenning on each other. When all's said and done, your ordinary tradesman is prevented by law from profiteering. But these people—with the excuse that they're ladies and gentlemen—are quite unscrupulous in their ways of making money. Getting commission, and moral blackmail, plays a big part."

"Jim, what do you mean?" Her thoughts leaped to Enid Faulkner. Had she told him anything about Cicely?

"Nothing much, only you must have guessed how this stupid, maddening publicity has made me a laughing stock among my colleagues. Mixing a social paragraph

with medical matters is not only rank impertinence but bad journalism. I——”

“Jim, is it as bad as that? Does Cicely know?”

“Of course she knows. She knows what I think about it. If she had any sense she wouldn’t have employed Faulkner’s wife—making the flat a ludicrous apology for a home.”

“That was my fault,” she said slowly. Never had she seen Jim so worked up, so un-negative, “You see,”—she must tread warily—“she was worrying Ernest for money, and I thought it would be a way out.”

He smiled wryly: “Oh, you women—you’re too deep for me. The things you think of when you take it into your heads to like one particular man—the lengths you go! In this case it doesn’t seem to have done much good.”

“No, it hasn’t. I see that. But I had to do what I could, I simply had to. Still, that’s all over now—I’ve grown up, I believe.”

“Disillusionment is another name for it, my dear. Tell me, why exactly are you marrying this man Peter?”

“Because I’m fond of him and I like being with him, generally. . . .”

“But not always,” he interrupted, “Go on.”

“And I can’t go on living on Cicely and you,” she added as an afterthought, in an effort to spare his feelings.

“On Cicely,” he repeated, “I thought it would come to that. But you didn’t mind living with your mother before. Why not now?” Then for the first time perceiving the misery in her face, he added: “The Faulkners might move away.”

“I hear they’re building a garage for Enid’s car,”

she said with simple finality. "Besides, I've got rather used to having money now."

He grunted. After this straightforward talk with Jim, Anne felt better. In telling him her motives they had become clear to herself. She arrived at the registry office on her wedding day, carrying the flowers which Lady Ingram had had sent from her garden and flushed with excitement, with the satisfactory feeling that springs from the decision on a definite course of action at last. Besides, being married to Peter would be exciting, to say the least of it.

The ceremony, which lasted a few minutes, was followed by a luncheon party at Claridges for the relatives, which Peter said closely resembled an Irish wake. This, in time, was succeeded by a vast cocktail party, attended chiefly by Peter's friends, parents being carefully excluded. Cicely was there, but Jim was not; Harmony emphatically was. Anne realised that a trifle like marriage would not stand in Harmony's light in the slightest degree. Her manner to Peter conveyed the same adoration, the same certainty that her affection was returned; and by various lipping comments she managed to intimate darkly that dear Peter was only marrying because of pressure. From what quarter the pressure was supposed to come, she did not indicate. Enid Faulkner, stricken with influenza, did not appear, but sent a long effusive letter to Anne accompanied by a framed colour-wash design of a set for a play, executed by herself. The paper was boldly stamped with the name of Ernest's cottage in deep red engraved letters.

Anne found herself an object of interest. It was the first time she had experienced the limelight of the press. Cameras clicked, brisk young men in fawn

soft hats asked her questions, eager young women examined her clothes. These last, however, were dealt with by Madame Vivienne personally, who issued detailed printed descriptions of each of her models bought by Anne. Peter, more accustomed to figuring in the news because of his racing and flying exploits, submitted with careless grace.

During the heat and babble of the party, Anne found Colin propped up in a chair, almost drunk.

"Darling, don't," she whispered, "You musn't drink any more. Promise?"

"Rather, not after to-day." His red hair clung to his head in the heat, "Not after to-day. You see I am going away—a long way—to Switzerland, in fact. No cocktails there—not for me."

"Yes, you'll be able to go now and I'll come and see you," she said soothingly, taking a glass from his hand. "Promise you'll take Cicely back after I've gone, and look after her—will you?"

"Promises—nothing but promises. Did you ever know such a family? No wonder I can't breathe, no wonder I want to fly—away."

"Colin, don't," she said sharply. "Pull yourself together, darling. If you don't, I can't leave you."

"Want me on your honeymoon too? What will Peter say?" He laughed long at his own joke, "Anyway, where are you going?"

"We haven't decided yet. Peter's going to take me in the new car, and we shall motor—what's the phrase—far into the night. Sounds good, doesn't it?"

"Sounds like Peter. Peter's a good fellow. He's going to let me fly 'Silver Queen' one day. Said so. . . ."

Anne went in search of Cicely, who looked the one calm and serene person in the room. She had had one cocktail.

"We're going soon," she said, "Will you take Colin home and ask Jim to have a look at him? And listen, Cicely, take care of yourself." She added, stricken with a momentary homesickness, "And don't worry about Miles. He'll be back next week, and if you take my advice, the next time Jim goes to Barty, I should go with him and let yourselves be seen by Enid. If she has any suspicions, or if she has been saying anything. . ."

"I just feel I can't go there," Cicely said, "Not yet."

"Why ever not?"

"I hated it all so—the dullness and dreariness."

"But a week-end just to see mother."

"I'll see." But Anne knew she would not go.

"Anne, I shall miss you dreadfully."

"You've still got Colin." She was thinking how defeated Cicely must feel. She'd tried so hard to keep her bound, but she hadn't succeeded.

"You'll come with Peter and stay as long as you like when you get back, won't you? I shall be so lonely. And if Peter goes on the flight to Australia, you'll come to me?"

"We'll talk all about that later. We must go to Colin."

She and Peter slipped away while the party was in full swing. When they were in the car, she said: "Peter darling, you're too drunk to drive. We'd better have dinner in London."

She had looked forward to the country so much, but

it was no good. Too much risk. He was sufficiently in control of himself to realize it.

"Sorry and all that."

They had the car taken back to the garage, slipped the luggage into a taxi and drove to the Dorchester.

They dined in a quiet corner.

"We'd better berth here," Peter said suddenly, now more or less recovered.

Anne stared at her name as Peter put it in the hotel book, and thought it looked really good.

"No one can say I'm unattached now," she said as they went up in the lift.

In the softly lit bedroom, she unpacked calmly and put her belongings in the wall-cupboards, which automatically lit inside when the door opened. A curious sensation as if she were watching someone else do these things overtook her. Not to be in the least shy or nervous on her wedding night was almost indecent, but no one could be shy of Peter, he was so much a jolly playmate. She put down his casual matter-of-factness to his probably being accustomed to this sort of proceeding. No doubt he'd spent many nights in hotels with girls, she told herself in a clear, frigid way, and wondered if he always got drunk first. And she had been sentimental enough to plan a wedding night in the country. A garden full of flowers and moonlight—romance. She opened her new dressing-case with a jerk, and reminded herself that these thoughts belonged to schooldays and serials in women's weeklies, yet somehow there was an inkling that Ernest, on his wedding day, wouldn't have been so drunk that he couldn't drive a car.

But then Ernest was a sham—an experienced sham who played on one's feelings.

The door opened and Peter came in in his dressing-gown, smoking a cigarette.

"Hullo, can I help? You're slow about your unpacking."

"How's the head?" she asked him, busy with something in her case.

"Not so good—but passable. Aren't you going to bed to-night?—it's getting late. Come on, I'll help. I'm a good ladies' maid."

Some little demon made her say drily: "I'm sure you are—with lots of good references."

Hands in dressing-gown pockets, he looked down at her. Sulkiness came into his blue eyes.

"You're cross with me, that's it. Well, we'll see about that." He put his cigarette on a silver ask tray, "Come here, you miserable little rabbit."

Like two schoolboys they ragged round the room. Anne was strong and fought his teasing slaps with all her might, while at intervals she said: "Shut up, Peter, this is an awful din. Do be quiet! They'll wonder what we're doing—we shall be having all the chambermaids in the place coming in."

"I don't care. Shall tell them I'm taming the shrew—the one I'm married to. Lord knows why."

At last, helpless and tired, she fell into a chair and unaccountably began to cry. In a flash, Peter knelt beside her. "Don't do that, dear. I know you're a bit fed up with me and disappointed. Now come along," he wiped her tears away with a large new silk handkerchief, then knelt down and took off her shoes and stockings, talking soothingly at the same time. Gradually

the sensation of unnaturalness faded from Anne and watching his deft, tender movements, she thought: He is sweet; he really is a darling. Then he was murmuring: "Darling, you're so lovely." She touched his hair with her finger-tips, and then their arms were round each other, and the outside world faded and then was lost to them as they kissed.

XII

CICELY escaped from Anne's wedding cocktail party and took Colin with her.

When she got to the flat she put him to bed, then slowly as if seeing them for the first time, she went round looking at Enid Faulkner's decorations. She sat down in the leather-lined room in one of the super-sprung armchairs, which gave way to the body and rested every muscle, and looked round at the room. It wasn't human, that was it—utterly inhuman in its impersonalness. The only satisfying thing was a Matisse drawing. She fixed her gaze on that and tried to ignore a tall spray of mother of pearl, supposed to resemble flowers, beneath it, and made a huge effort to rid herself of the feeling of frozen detachment which had enveloped her since Miles had gone. Now Anne was gone, too—she had escaped her.

She felt age-old with experience. Could she once have been young, cycling down the may-filled lanes of home, swinging a basket of eggs with one hand, proud of her skill, and singing to the time of her pedalling feet? How proud she had been when her engagement to Jim was announced in the Times, and the red-nosed Gardener girl, who so much wanted to be married and hadn't had the chance, had congratulated her with undisguised envy in her voice. Jim—good, clever, with a rising reputation was a considered catch among the

girls in the neighbourhood. Cicely thought how pre-war in everything this village still was, except for two petrol-filling stations and a placard with "Teas provided" in rough letters outside the Gibleys' cottage, nothing altered much, certainly not its point of view. It would take lots of years to wake it out of its eternal sleep. A kind of nausea filled her when she thought of it. And the people—she didn't care if she never saw them again—not one was outstanding in looks or learning. Anybody who was amusing at all migrated to London. Yet Jim still chose to look on Barty and the County Hospital as the centre of life.

Jim—he and she had grown excessively polite to each other in an absurd novelettish way. He never came to her room now. She wondered if he had grown physically tired of her or if he was just hurt by her attitude. It made no difference really. The fact remained that he had spared her any direct excuses, for which she was thankful and grateful.

No more did she sense his disapproval; he had become passive, carrying on with his work with unswerving punctuality, leaving her to do as she liked.

As she sat in her luxurious chair, she wondered how all this had happened in so short a time. Funny how days, which seemed uneventful, passed, yet just by passing had a disintegrating quality on people's lives and affections. She remembered how, during the first months of their marriage, she used to ask Jim what he was thinking of when she saw that far-away look in his eyes. Now she didn't care. Her thoughts went to Anne and her odd inborn worldly wisdom. Anne had been aware all the time that she wasn't really in love with Jim.

Then the thought of Miles came back again. She began to hunger for his kisses, for the sensation of tingling life his nearness brought with it. Morbid to sit here and think, wrong to be a slave to this overruling emotion. Jumping up, she switched on the wireless. A soothing flood of music filled the room—Sibelius' "Tapiola." Finnish forests—spiked darkly against the sky—miles and miles of them—smelling crisp and woody. She considered the idea of going to a concert or opera, to let the full wash of sound sweep all disturbance from her mind.

Then the entrance door opened and shut. She heard Jim in the hall and went to meet him.

"Well, how did the cocktail party go off?"

"Very well. Anne and Peter left about seven o'clock."

"Have you had dinner?"

"No. There were so many oddments to eat—I don't feel hungry. What are you going to do?"

That queer laboratory smell about his clothes—how she hated it.

"I thought you'd be bound to be off with some of your friends celebrating."

"No," she said slowly, "I don't think I feel like celebrating Anne's wedding."

He scrutinized her pale face.

"I admit it was a queer sort of affair—no sentiment attached, all hurry and bustle. Still as they don't think marriage very important, I don't really see why they should make a fuss about it."

"That's not true. You don't mean that."

"Let's have a glass of port." He led the way into the dining-room. Cicely stood still thinking while he found the glasses.

"I do mean it," he said, "from this point of view. After all, if you're going on a short journey you don't make terrific preparations, you slip away quietly."

"Then you take it for granted it won't last?"

"Certainly not. I think it may—just because they haven't promised 'till death do us part.' I don't know much about Peter's kind, but I should imagine marriage to him is only another affair. But if they can survive a year or two, I don't see why they shouldn't settle down. It's Anne who's in for a thin time. You see, she'll have a good deal of putting up with to do. The men I come across, students and the young housemen, have to take the thing seriously—a question of money to them—and it's a big matter if they back the wrong horse. Breaking up a home costs the devil of a lot of money."

"Yes, I suppose it does," said Cicely vaguely, surprised at Jim's talkativeness and frame of mind and shying from a subject she didn't particularly want to discuss.

"Different from our wedding, wasn't it, Snooks?" She glanced up quickly at his change of voice and laughed nervously. "Yes—it was rather," noticing the red stain of carbol fuchsin on his hands.

"Yes," he repeated thoughtfully, lighting a cigar, "I was poor enough to be obliged to choose carefully."

Now she felt the necessity to force him—to hear him say he needed her, to be quite certain she still had his devotion, and background—something to hang on to in this world which had become so shifting. She didn't want his love-making, that was in the past, but she did want to make sure her power was still there. Putting the table between them, she said, dropping her lids over her clear eyes: "Any regrets, Jim?"

He answered steadily : "No regrets, Snooks, about you. You know that, just as you know I wouldn't have stood all this," he looked round the room, "except for you. I only want you to be happy. The trouble is, I can't contribute anything towards it now—your happiness, I mean—it's been taken out of my hands and that makes me irritable at times."

Passive—negative—helpless—pathetic—her strength rose, but she needed still more. Gently she goaded him on smilingly : "How silly, Jim. You can get on quite well without me. I believe you enjoyed being here when I was away."

"Perhaps, for a short time, but I knew you were coming back. The place isn't the same without you."

He poured out another glass of port and his mouth tightened at the corners.

"I don't know why we're saying all this. You know it all perfectly well, Snooks. As if words mattered . . ."

"They do, Jim. Can't you see that they do ?"

"Nonsense ! It's because you've got used to the silly chatter of your new friends trying to boost you up. No, my dear, actions count, not words ; you can see it everywhere."

"Oh, but words help, they do really. They smooth things over and make them clear. If only you'd talk more, and tell me about everything—your work for instance."

"You know you hate it, so why should I bother you ?" Her shoulders drooped hopelessly. He came round the table and put an arm loosely round her.

"Don't you worry, go on enjoying yourself in your own way. I can manage. I should be glad, though, if

you'll keep your friends from nosing into my affairs—that's all."

"That's why you won't tell me about your work any more. You don't trust me. You're afraid I shall give you away."

"No, Snooks, that's not true either. You've always hated laboratories and everything to do with them. One of us must be responsible for looking after Mr. Crispin's wishes—it's obviously me, so while you're using his money I must go on working and do the job properly."

"But you needn't make yourself a slave to it, Jim, and let it come between us. He didn't mean that, I'm sure. Why do you take it so awfully seriously? The whole thing seems to be getting on your mind. You've always wanted to do research work, and now . . ."

"We've said all this before," he said. "Haven't we? Don't let's argue, dear—not to-night. We'll see what happens. But this publicity business has had a bad effect. I shall look such an utter fool if the thing doesn't come off. The shoals of letters I've had."

"What kind of letters?"

"Some encouraging—some sceptical—lots from the anti-vivisectionists, and societies, institutions, medical men, and as you can imagine—all this when I've scarcely begun. Not surprising, is it, if the authorities did look on me as just a sensation-monger, an upstart? The whole thing lends itself. They know very little about me—a country pathologist. I really think"—the effect of several glasses of port were on him now—"if it weren't for Colin and subjects like him, I'd cut and run now."

"Don't, Jim!" This madness must stop. "Don't

talk like this. Colin—he's in bed. Anne told me to ask you to have a look at him. Will you go up now? He's only tired and overdone, I think."

His deep-set eyes flashed behind their glasses.

"Yes, I'll go. Poor devil. Another victim to this damned fetish for getting a kick out of life."

"Don't be so *dramatic*, Jim darling," she begged as he went out of the room. Hastily she put the port away in the cupboard and took the glasses into the pantry, and followed him to Colin's room, thinking that perhaps after all she had made a mistake in forcing him to talk. If he did do anything desperate, such as chucking his research work, it would mean she'd have to choose a definite line of action. She was thinking again of Miles when she went into Colin's room.

Jim was sitting on the bed, the stethoscope round his head. Colin, sleepily polite, was bearing with the examinations. He grinned at her as Jim took the instrument from his ears and started thumping his chest. His skin, moist with sweat, gleamed whitely—too white for a man, she thought, listening to the dull thud Jim's tapping produced. At last he had finished, and put the bed-covers over the thin body.

"Young fool, aren't you, drinking all that poison."

"Must celebrate sometimes," Colin pleaded, "and Anne isn't married every day."

"You ought to have gone away to get some fresh air before, as I told you to—can't do more than that."

"Okay—I'll go any time you like, now. Anything the matter—anything fresh, I mean?"

"You've got to give up these late nights and cocktails that's all, and get away." Jim abruptly got up. "Go to sleep now. Here, let's take your temperature first."

Cicely moved restlessly round the room, aware that Jim was anxious. When he had snapped the thermometer back in its case she followed him out.

"What's the matter, Jim?"

"Active crepitations—slight temperature—T.B. probably active again. I warned you."

There was definite accusation in his eyes. She stayed silent, considering him unfair. Colin had chosen to stay of his own free will; she hadn't tried to keep him. It was almost as if Jim disliked her, the manner in which he told her she'd better go to bed, he was going to the lab. to look at some plates he'd got in the incubator. His softened mood had entirely disappeared. As she put herself to bed, she thought that with Anne and Colin both away she would be alone now with Jim, and his renewed disapproval, and wondered if she could bear it.

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The next morning Miles rang up. He'd come back unexpectedly.

"A day in the country," he said, "would be a good idea. Can you manage it?"

"Yes—yes." Her voice rang with gladness as she made arrangements.

"Will you be all right?" she asked Colin.

"Of course I will. Lots of books and Jim wants me to stay in bed for a bit. I don't mind. Have a good time."

As she was turning away, her mind bent on the day before her, he pulled at her hand.

"I say, haven't you felt since we came to London that you've got to catch hold of things and live in the present? I mean nothing seems to last. I never thought

of it like that in the country—there everything seemed to go on for ever. Here most things wear themselves out—or we wear them out—and nothing lasts ; perhaps it's because they differ in quality—and I like your brown dress," he added, as if trying to take the bite from his words. "It suits your hair."

"You mean, you don't think Miles and I can go on ? You think our friendship will wear itself out ? Why do you say that, Colin dear ? Is it because you're frightened I shall let Jim down ?"

"No," he said, "No. I was thinking of you. You're inclined to bank on people—aren't you ? You know what I mean—you're so wholehearted about them and then you're awfully shaken if they don't come up to your expectations."

"Miles means an awful lot to me," she said slowly.

"I know. I guessed that."

"And Jim is being so difficult."

"He doesn't interfere, though."

"No, he doesn't take any interest now in my doings. Perhaps he doesn't care."

Colin grinned up at her. "You can't have it all ways, old thing. You're bluffing him like hell—keeping your own secrets. He must have an inkling something's up."

"I'm trying to protect him," she argued simply.

He hesitated, and then said : "You want to keep him and Miles too. You may not know it, but it's true. Lots of women are like that—in a way it's natural."

"Colin ! How can you say that ! You know perfectly well . . . Oh, it's unfair—unfair——" her voice, steeped with anger, deepened, "You shouldn't say such things. You can't know anything about it, you're

too young. You and Anne against me—nobody understands.”

“It’s all right, don’t get worked up about it.” He wished now he hadn’t started the talk. A deep weariness was again stealing over his body. And yet someone must say something to her, before it was too late. “I only tried to help a bit. I’ll mind my own business from now on.”

Full of compunction for his obvious weakness, she softened, “No, no! I want you to say what you think, dear. I do see you want to help, but perhaps no one can.”

He smiled gently. “You know, it’s a funny thing, but when you’re a bit seedy and tucked away in bed, you think you’ve got a much clearer vision than the people who are up and doing. You’re an onlooker, of course.”

“More spiritual—less physical,” she said sympathetically.

“I don’t know about that,” he said rather grimly, “I’m aware of the physical part of me all right.”

“Oh, Colin, I’m sorry. Look here, dear, I’ll come back early, only I feel I simply must go. You see, I haven’t seen him for so long.” Her eagerness was pathetic in its childishness.

“I don’t want you. Send Amber in and we’ll be quite happy together. I must go to sleep, I don’t mind telling you.”

“Bennett will bring you anything you want.” She took a taxi to Miles’ flat and found him standing by his car outside, waiting for her. Somehow this prosaic method of meeting dashed her a little, but she revived as soon as he spoke. So many weeks she had been

conjuring him up in her mind, had been longing to feel his arms around her, to hear his voice. His few letters, telegraphic in their briefness, had told her nothing, conveyed little of his feelings. Then suddenly she was with him once more, and he was taking off his soft hat and smiling. The loneliness of those intervening weeks dropped away and was lost in time. She thought, it's like coming home to be with him again.

"How are you? You're looking fit." His blue eyes scrutinized her face. Then: "How nice that thing is you're wearing."

"And you're fatter," she laughed. "Too much good food in rich hotels, I expect. Did you have a good holiday?"

"Yes, rather." He helped her into the car. "Extremely pleasant. Now then," he got in beside her, "Where shall we go?"

"You choose."

"Right. I thought Rye. I've got lunch packed up."

"You think of everything." She sank back revelling in the feeling that she was being taken care of, while he drove through the traffic. Occasionally she glanced at his large figure veritably oozing a sense of well-being and tried hard to swallow down a feeling of resentment that he should be so well and happy, while she had missed him so intolerably. It was a lovely day. Miles' luck held—the weather always seemed to obey his wishes.

"Are you glad to be back?" she asked once.

"Oh, quite," his voice was distant. When they had cleared the built-up areas he said: "The country's looking good."

"Yes." Watching the slide past of smooth stubbled fields, honey coloured in the sunlight, the glint of purple

blackberries in the hedges, the slight smear of gold on the trees, she remained unimpressed by their loveliness. They were too much a part of her life—too ordinary. Presently he stopped the car and suggested a cigarette.

"Now, darling, tell me what you're been doing." Leaning back comfortably he tipped his hat over his eyes.

"Do you really want to know?" Her eyes were down-cast.

"Why, of course. Don't you want to tell me?"

"Not particularly. They're of no interest to you—my doings, I mean. I'm sure yours were much more exciting."

"I dunno. I just had a nice holiday, that's all, there's nothing to tell."

She wondered why he didn't kiss her, aware again of the gulf of weeks and separate experiences which divided them and not knowing how to bridge it. He would not tell her about his doings, did not appear to feel the necessity of sharing his experiences with her.

"But you," he went on, "your part is much more thrilling. After all, women, specially a woman like you, are not left fortunes every day. I want to hear your new experiences."

"There aren't any," she faltered. "I shall miss Anne very much, and now Colin is seedy again—he's going to Switzerland."

"Yes, but you've got your own life to live, my dear, all before you—full of adventure—such fun."

Was he being deliberately unsympathetic, or did he just lack understanding? No, that was not possible—before he went away he'd had an uncanny insight into the working of her mind. Anyway he disliked self-

pity in any form; he'd told her so. With an effort she pulled herself up.

"Yes. I expect you're right. I hope you are."

"Well, never mind now. I—we went to Madrid, you know—it was very hot, spent a day at the Prado—took a long time over the Velasquez and the Goya drawings below—marvellous. After that we drove to the South, drank sherry at Jerez, went to Seville—we enjoyed that immensely, the cathedral specially good, the Giralda lovely, then the Alcazar—I got a little tired of Moorish arches. Then we drove to Granada—I'd never seen the Alhambra before—glorious view——" he broke off. "Why are you smiling?"

"At your descriptions. They're like your letters—brief and to the point—impersonal."

"Well," he said quietly, "I always think one's travel experiences should be kept to oneself; you can only tell of the actual objects you see. It's the impressions that are most important, and the emotions you absorb, which become a part of one's make-up. Impossible to hand those on, they're so essentially personal."

"Yes, but if two people see them together—two people who are in tune—they can share."

"We were speaking of descriptions," he pointed out. "Now you're talking of lovers."

She ignored this, and asked a question which had been worrying her for some time.

"Who was in your party?"

"We? Oh, well, the Mills, you know, I told you about them. Father, mother and"—an almost imperceptible hesitation—"their daughter, Jake."

"What an odd name."

"She's an odd girl, but with character."

"Pretty?"

"Yes, I suppose she is—at least she's considered so. Full of life, very independent."

"You like that in a woman, don't you?"

"Yes, I do rather. Saves a lot of trouble. Well I expect we'd better be getting along if we want to bathe." He flung his cigarette away and pressed the self-starter.

And so he had shared impressions with another woman, seen beauty with her, been her companion for three weeks—was this the reason he seemed different? Suddenly Cicely saw the future looming up with its uncertainties, its lapses of time when she could neither see nor hear him, because she would not have the right. Moments of intense happiness and joy, intervals of blankness and hunger. Live in the present, Colin had said. He was right, of course. Stupid and unnecessary to fear the future.

They stopped for lunch under some trees. He told her to find a comfortable spot away from the fallen leaves, while he unpacked. Smoked salmon, sandwiches, lobster patties, York ham which melted in the mouth, peaches and a few bloom-coated plums and champagne. Then for no apparent reason the tension she had sensed between them disappeared. He leant down and dropped tiny kisses on her upturned face as she sat there. "Darling, how sweet you look, so fresh and calm—after all that hot sunshine in Spain."

"Do I?" Her pleasure at his words lit up her face. "Oh, Miles this is so nice. Lovely lunch, lovely day."

"And lovely lady. Couldn't be better. Come along—hold out your glass."

He filled it with the sizzling champagne. "There, drink up. Everything all right again?"

"Again." Then he did know of her unhappiness, but had chosen to elude it.

She leant against his shoulders.

"I'm quite happy when I'm with you, you know that."

He looked sceptical. "You're adorable, my dear, but not always truthful, I'm afraid. Still, all the best people are liars. Now don't look solemn again, I can't have that." After a bit he said: "You're such a child, darling, with your varying moods; so transparent, too."

Colin's words again came back to her. Whole-hearted he had called her.

"Perhaps you have that effect on me," she said. "I don't think Jim thinks I'm a child." Then she asked simply: "Miles, why don't you like me to tell you I love you? It's so queer—you said you were glad I wasn't a coquette, and yet sometimes I think you'd prefer just a flirtation. I don't feel that way with you, you know." He lit a cigarette, taking the support of his shoulder away. "Now don't let's analyse, darling. Rather boresome on a day like this. Here we are together on a bright October morning, so let's enjoy it. To-morrow means work for me. That's enough, isn't it?"

She was forced to smile at his boyish keenness to enjoy, and allowed herself to be carried away by it. All the things she had meant to say were banished into the background of her mind with the thrashings out she had intended. As usual she fell in at last with his will and gave herself to it entirely.

They explored the ancient narrow streets of Rye, and the houses mellow and yellow with age, then drove out

along the marshes and bathed from the car, and had tea in an old, old inn. Then dinner in London. He teased her and chatted inconsequently of current happenings—he was extremely interested in world affairs, skilfully avoiding any recurrence of the morning's talk and its dangerous trend to seriousness. When at last, back in his flat, passion swept them together, all arguments and uncertainties and unacknowledged fears were submerged by the great blinding fact of his need for her.

Next day Cicely awoke to the realization that her friendship with Miles had been a series of episodes and was likely to continue so. The days and evenings she spent with him were like bright jewels shining on the dull chain of everyday life. She was beginning to learn that her desire for continuity, some promise of future meetings and letters to fix her mind on, to look forward to, was not shared by him. He seemed quite content with these spasmodic meetings and glad to absorb himself in his work and other activities between times. The quality of the unattainable which he held for her began to tinge her normal life with unreality. Unconsciously, like many people in love, she started to dramatize herself and her emotions, undermining her usual calm serenity with quick changes of mood, unexpected impulses, self-criticism.

Anne, who walked into the flat a week after her wedding, noticed the change in Cicely, who almost wept at the sight of her. Anne's intuition told her the cause, and, with a little twinge of pride, she congratulated herself on remaining outside the sphere of disturbing, devastating emotion. Seven days with Peter had been enough to assure her that she was not in love with him

and never would be. She liked him, they were good companions, and fond of each other, which was satisfactory ; but when Cicely asked her anxiously and with irritating frankness : "Do you love Peter?" she answered : "Is it possible to love a cold shower-bath? It's jolly refreshing, it's a tonic, and it spurs you on and makes you feel life's worth living, and all that—but it doesn't soothe you and comfort you like a nice hot one."

"You don't mean that. You're making fun of me," Cicely answered, with her new-born self-sensitiveness. "What you really mean is that you don't want me to ask questions."

"Perhaps," said Anne, "it may be a bride's reticence, you know. I dare say after a few months I shall be quite ready to discuss my husband with all sorts of hags. But at the moment I find Peter too true for that."

"No, you never will—you're not built that way."

"Still, you don't talk Jim over—much," Anne said stoutly. "On the whole you're good about it. How is he, by the way?"

"He think's it's my fault Colin didn't go to Switzerland before, and he's angry with me. He went up North last Monday and scarcely said good-bye. He's gone to see some modern laboratories in Liverpool."

Anne's brown eyes shadowed, the liveliness left her face.

"No," she said, "it's much more my fault than yours. I was a selfish little pig. You see, I couldn't bear to be parted from him when I was so miserable and out of tune. Oh Lord, I do feel guilty. Peter's worried too. That's why we hurried back from Wales. Peter thought he might fly him over to Switzerland. Colin would love that, and it wouldn't be so tiring as the railway journey."

"We ought to ask Jim first, I think. I don't know how to get in touch with him. He didn't say where he was staying and I forgot to ask."

"As bad as that, is it? Do you think he knows anything about Miles that would account for his being angry?"

"No, I'm sure he doesn't. He's just generally fed up about that publicity business, and Colin, and thinks I'm the cause of it all. But Colin doesn't seem too bad now. He stayed in bed a day or two, and says he's quite all right. Oh, Anne, I am so glad you're back! It's lovely to have someone to talk to. I'm worried, too, about Enid Faulkner. I hope she won't say anything to mother about Miles. No, I know it wouldn't be anything direct, but hinting's easy, and mother might think it her duty to warn Jim. You know her ideas about husbands, and how they ought to look after their wives."

"I know. I've got to take Peter down to Barty to show him off some time. But I don't want to—oh, I don't."

"Still afraid of meeting Ernest?"

Anne turned away, "Don't ask—please don't question me any more"

"Anyway, mother's coming up to see Colin before he goes to-morrow, and we shall soon know how much she's heard."

They all stood round the Silver Queen at the flying ground. She was ready for flight.

The propeller churned the air and slashed the sunlight to glittering fragments.

Colin's mother looked on, a little doubtful about the safety of the frail thing, but determined to be air-minded and to move with the times and her children.

"Why don't you go on an ordinary nice little ship?" she had said to Colin the night before. "So safe."

"No safer than a 'plane." Colin for once stood his ground firmly. "Look here, I'm going to fly over. If Peter isn't allowed to take me I shall go by Imperial Airways. I wish you wouldn't treat me like a permanent invalid, and it's so silly, mother dear. You must be progressive in your ideas. Everybody flies everywhere."

"Yes, yes. I expect I'm just a silly old woman."

"Of course you are, you always have been." Colin gave her a hearty kiss on her red powderless cheek. "And now you've got one of the best amateur pilots in the country for a son-in-law, you've got to take flying for granted."

"Yes, I expect I shall have to. He's a very nice young man. I'm so glad Anne has found a good husband." Then: "I wish I could have seen more of you, dear, before you went away."

"You always say that, too. We've been together for a year or two and I must have worried you a lot. It's decent of Cicely to pay all my expenses to Switzerland. When I'm fit I shall come back and get a job. Do something for a living—but it won't be chickens."

She patted his head with her fingers, gnarled by rheumatism, and smiled. "No, my dear, I don't suppose it will—how you did hate them. But everything at Barty is just the same when you want to come back—ready for any of you three children. I want you all to feel that."

"Now, now. No sentiment. Stop those tears."

"I'm getting old," she said, "and I feel it when I leave my home. I shall get back as soon as you've gone, dear."

Now she stood in her country tweeds and thick shoes by the plane, making sure Colin was well wrapped up.

Anne, sparkling with health and gaiety, was standing by Peter while he talked to a mechanic.

At last he bent down and kissed her. "Shan't be long. I'll come straight to Cicely's on Thursday."

"Yes, darling. Wish I was coming with you."

"Not sick of the sight of me yet?"

"Even my slight affections have a little more than a week's wear in them. Mother is looking at us with that old clucking hen gaze. Thinks we're being all broody and bridal. Bye-bye, my sweet."

"Cheerio, sweetheart. You'd better look after Cicely a bit, she looks under the weather. She seems to take her affair a bit steeply. She's the type to take things seriously—but silly though, don't you think?"

"You see, she doesn't look on it as an ordinary affaire. She thinks it's love with a capital L. It's a very dangerous state to be in."

"Like you were—once!"

"Yes, but I didn't happen to be married."

"Can't see what difference that makes."

"No? Well, you'd better get along. Take care of Colin for me, and don't do any stunts. I'll do your helmet up."

Her eyes were nevertheless full of tears when she kissed Colin on the cheek. She noticed he avoided her mouth, and it was this little gesture that made her feel so sad. So he knew he was worse again, and looked upon himself as unhealthy and infectious.

"I've sent the wire to the Sanatorium, Colin, to confirm Jim's letter," she said, "and Peter and I'll come and see you when you get settled in."

"Yes—do. I say, isn't she lovely, waiting there for us? I'm looking forward to the trip no end, you know. Give my love to Jim, Cicely." They both climbed in. The mechanics stood back from the machine. She wobbled uncertainly over the ground at first, then, gathering speed, took off and rose like a delicious silver moth into the gold October sunlight, leaving Cicely, Anne and their mother like three little pigmies in the middle of the field.

Colin breathed in the fresh cool air, expanded his lungs as far as he could—but not too far because of the persisting tightness which pinched them back. Up and up they went until tiny smoky clouds enveloped them. It was like ploughing your way through cotton wool, he thought. They looked substantial yet soft, as if inviting you to lay yourself on them and go to sleep in their comforting folds.

The plane was flying straight on now, heading for the coast. Peter glanced back at him. "I'm fine," Colin shouted through the speaking tube, "feel like the king of the castle."

The engines hummed rhythmically, The first exhilaration passed from Colin. He began to feel sleepy, and, to keep himself from sleeping when there was so much to enjoy, he turned his thoughts to his life ahead in the sanatorium.

Jim had told him many times how pleasant it was at Wengen. He would get plenty of sleep, good food and a lovely climate. He wouldn't be bored, he was sure, and no family affairs to bother with.

Now they were over the Channel. The blue of the sea, for some reason, was greying over, and the waves were fringed with white. Of course, the sun had gone in, that was why. It was much colder and the sky had blackened. Rather a relief to see the shore of France in the distance. The ships were rolling a bit; he could see them as he leaned over. They looked as if they were leaping over the waves now, not pushing their way through them as they had at the start.

They must be running into a storm. What an experience! Lucky, really, for him, though it must be an everyday occurrence to airmen. Peter's back gave no inkling; he was just flying straight on. Then a flash of lightning and the nose of the plane was turned upwards. Going up above the storm, thought Colin, and, glancing earthwards again, saw that they were over the French coast; then the grey carpet of clouds hid all below. Much colder now—fine, though, to be so high in the heavens. This was where he'd always longed to be—unhampered by mortals or objects of any kind. A great happiness came over him, and with it the desire to shout for joy. He began to sing the first thing that came into his head—"Git along, little doggie, get along, get along . . . We're heading for the last round up" . . . he forgot the intervening words and hummed: "Ta—ta-ta—ta-ta-tum te-tum-te-tum."

Peter turned his head and smiled, turned back again, and the plane continued to climb.

Suddenly Colin was aware of a tickle in his throat. He stopped singing as his mouth filled with a warm, salty-tasting mass, which overflowed down his leather coat. For a second he stared at the blood, incredulous

and frightened. "We're flying too high for me": it was his last thought before he fainted.

Peter, turning round a few minutes later, saw the blood and the quiet figure, and came to the instant conclusion that he must land. He knew little about sick people—they scared him stiff. "I must get help immediately," he thought. Colin might be dead already for all he knew. Rain was falling, blurring the landscape. His whole attention was fixed now on finding a good field to land on; he was thanking his lucky stars they'd cleared the sea when an extra heavy clap of thunder resounded like the growl of a god in pain.

The fields looked horribly small, the ground rough, and dotted here and there with small houses and gardens. He calculated that the only possible field he could see with more or less level turf would mean a crosswind landing. If he waited a bit and went on he might find a better place, but the thought of that still figure behind made him decide to use it. Circling round he noted the upward grade of the ground and fringe of scrub bushes on the side. He'd landed before in worse spots, after all. So he glided down, his mind still bent on the tricky manoeuvre before him—and yet not entirely. The truth dawned that he had been careless. He shouldn't have taken Colin up so high—too cold—too little pressure perhaps on his lungs. If he were really dead, he'd killed him. Anne would think that even if she didn't actually say so in words. Damn, his goggles were misted with the rain. He took them off and crouched well down behind the wind-shield. Must concentrate. Not much space in that beastly field. How he'd take off again heaven only knew.

Filthy luck on poor old Colin all this, and on Anne too.

Suddenly on the ground, small objects appeared. A group of children emerged from the bushes at the side of the field, where they had evidently been sheltering, and ran across it, scattering as they went.

He did what he could to avoid them. "Anne would hate it if I hurt them," he said to himself, and as he said it he knew something was wrong. The machine had flicked into a spin. . . .

There was a frightful crash and a sheet of flame which the fascinated children joined by their parents, continued to watch till it diminished from a sheet to a flicker and then to a dull, sullen glow.

XIII

CICELY and Anne were bound together during the ensuing months. Stark realization had Anne in its grip. She was free as far as money was concerned; Peter's will had done that. Her inclination was to cut loose from the life which had made her so selfishly blind and to live with Peter's parents. They longed to have her with them, but Cicely needed her and Peter had told her to look after Cicely, so once again she found herself caught up in a vicious circle of sentiment, self-reproach, sense of futility and inaction.

She hated the flat now that Colin was there no longer, and the fear of being alone in it when Jim and Cicely were out drove her to parties and the company of Peter's friends—the round of snack and cocktail bars, film first nights, noisy gatherings in flats, studios, and houses in mews.

They termed Peter's death "filthy luck" and "rotten break," and speedily forgot him, but kept Anne with them by neatly worded references to his memory, for, after all, she had the "dough," and she was generous.

The lines in Jim's lean face deepened. He worked incessantly, and never mentioned Colin. His silence raised another barrier between him and Cicely. She knew he blamed her, or, if not her, her money, for Colin's death, and yet he was gentler than he had ever been and more considerate. Anne realized the struggle he was making to rid himself of the feeling of contempt

he had for both her and Cicely—contempt for their little-mindedness and egotism which had kept Colin with them instead of letting him go away at the beginning. Colin hadn't had a square deal, he had told her indignantly when the news of the crash reached them. Cicely was not present, but he allowed his scorn and grief full vent, mercilessly ignoring her suffering till she could bear it no longer and ran to her room.

His visits to Barty became more frequent, and sometimes Cicely was almost certain he knew of her meetings with Miles.

"Doing anything special, to-day, Snooks?" he would ask.

With eyes averted she mentioned a luncheon party or a concert, conscious of his quick scrutiny, after which he said nothing. The very fact that Miles had not been recently mentioned between them seemed to indicate that it was a subject Jim thought best to avoid.

Desperately, one day in November when a slow drizzle enveloped the Heath and obscured all view, Anne said to Cicely: "Let's pack up and go abroad, let's get out of this. We could take mother with us. It's bad for her to be all alone in the cottage."

Cicely, startled, blurted out: "Oh, I couldn't. I couldn't leave London now."

"I could take mother," Anne said.

"And leave me?"

"No, I 'spose I can't." Anne turned away despondently, wondering why she was so weak, why she pandered to Cicely's wishes, why she was sentimental enough to take Peter's last words to her so seriously, why she was in this awful muddle of feeling. Frightened, that was what she was, scared stiff of life and its conse-

quences . . . and all the time there was one refuge calling to her, now more than ever.

The longing to see Ernest, to ask his advice, to hurl her own ignorance at his experience, was sometimes intolerable. She felt he could put things straight for her—make her see them in their true perspective. What had she done that Colin and Peter should now be taken away from her? Continually she asked herself that question, and when she had gone down to Brook Cottage with Jim to break the news of Colin's death, she asked her mother the same question.

"You're being trained, darling," Mrs. Simpson had said gently as she weeded the rockery.

"Trained in what?"

"In self-discipline, perhaps. Who can tell? God's ways are strange to us."

"But why should Colin and Peter both be sacrificed to teach me a lesson?"

"Perhaps they have both been saved worse things. I always felt there was not much future for Colin. The dear boy hadn't a great deal of grip on life, you know."

"Yes, but Jim thought he'd got a chance—he said so. If only he had gone away before."

Mrs. Simpson's eyes were streaming with tears when she looked up.

"Defiance doesn't get you anywhere, Anne dear. You've got to submit. We all have to, sooner or later. You can't put your finger on any certain 'if' and say 'if I hadn't done that, this wouldn't have happened.' We're all so dependent on others, and the impulses for good and evil they arouse in us, and we in them, and so on in an endless chain."

"What do you think I ought to do now?"

"That's for you to say. I would like to have you here, but Cicely wants you, and Peter's mother, too. Perhaps on the whole Cicely needs you more than anyone, though I don't know quite why I say that. She and Jim used to be enough for each other when they were here."

This made Anne say quietly :

"Have you seen much of Enid Faulkner?"

"She came to tea once; I think I wrote and told Cicely. But I found I didn't care for her, dear. Gossip and tittle-tattle about London people don't amuse me, besides I found her appearance quite revolting for the country. So much paint and stuff everywhere—on her mouth and cheeks and nails. I met Ernest Faulkner the day before he went to America, and he looked quite ill, I thought. In the post-office, you know."

"Yes, you told me yesterday, dear," Anne reminded her, thinking at the same time how vague her mother was getting, and glad she had insisted on her having an extra trustworthy maid—Ellen. She hadn't known whether to be pleased to sorry to find Ernest was not in the village and there was no chance of seeing him. On the whole she thought it better as it was, she couldn't trust herself to be sensible—yet. She said to her mother's kneeling figure :

"Did Enid Faulkner seem to like Cicely?"

Slowly Mrs. Simpson unbent herself and stood up.

"I don't discuss my daughters with strangers," she said with dignity, "And Jim and Cicely must settle their own differences. You see, Cicely has always been so unimaginative, so young in her views—different from you, and I expect she's learning her lesson too, only in a different way."

"Yes, but some people take it harder than others," Anne said with a twinge of self-pity. Her mother sighed.

"And she was so sure the money was going to give you all that you wanted most." Then she added, "Jim, of course, is being foolish too—cowardly I call it. In my young days a husband would have put his foot down, forbidden her to go out with other men."

Really her mother was full of surprises, Anne thought. How much or how little did she know about Cicely—what had Enid—the little beast—said?

"Have you told Jim that?" she asked now wonderingly.

"I gave him one of my roundabout lectures, without saying anything definite." Mrs. Simpson drew out her scissors from her gardening-apron, and snapped off a dead head, "And I told Mrs. Faulkner very definitely not to interfere in other people's affairs."

"Darling, you're wonderful, I didn't know you had it in you."

"I haven't really, you know. I don't want to be bothered with it all, but I knew Colin was worried about something—although he didn't say anything definite in his letters. I did what I could for his sake."

"But why not for Cicely's sake? You interfered in my affairs—you wanted to send me away when you though I was getting fond of Ernest. So why don't you try to manage Cicely?"

"Because it's no good. She and Jim have got to work it out together—or perhaps Cicely will have to do it for herself, and you'd better not try to help either. I'm disappointed in Jim. He doesn't lift a finger to prevent her as far as I can see. It's all wrong."

But Anne, as she walked back to the house, thought

that perhaps after all Jim was right. And she smiled to herself—a little maliciously—as she thought of Cicely so determined to spare Jim, so full of good intention, yet so ostrich-like in her lack of perception. Yet, Jim was a bit of an enigma—what had he got up his sleeve?

But as the weeks went on, Cicely became increasingly difficult to deal with. She was a woman in a dream, her mind fixed on anything but the actual moment. She went through the daily routine of ordering meals, shopping, a few dinner parties which she gave for Lady Harvey and other people she met on committees, which Anne thought extremely dull and heavy—some bridge parties, with effective calm. Only when she was going to dinner with Miles did she wake up and become alive. This occurred about twice a week. Anne fell to wondering which was the real Cicely—this brilliant, effervescing creature, taking such pains with her dressing, or the quiet capable woman she knew so well. She wondered too, which one Miles recognized as the true Cicely. Sometimes she would come back from these meetings with Miles, crushed and sad, at others confident and happy. But nothing would induce her to talk about him. Even Colin's death, which to Anne was such a tragedy, appeared not to have touched her deeply.

Music was the only thing that really interested her at all. She would say: "There's an Elgar Concert to-night, let's go," and Anne would fall in with her suggestion, and would sit and listen to the intricacies of the Third Symphony with only half her attention, while Cicely remained rapt and quiet until the end.

Above all she loved the opera. Her appetite for Wagner was insatiable. Then Anne had another glimpse of the different Cicely. Her emotions seemed to sway

with the passion of the music and were reflected on her absorbed face, and even her hands as they lay in her lap.

"Do you ever go to the opera with Miles?" Anne asked her once.

"Yes, often. He loves it too. I only lately found it out."

"A bond between you?" Anne said teasingly. But she refused to talk, and quietly nodded.

Then, inevitably, Christmas was descending upon them. Anne had already made up her mind to spend it with her mother, so apparently had Jim. It was Cicely who brought up the subject while they were having dinner, and showed she was hurt and surprised to find their plans were made.

"We've spent Christmas Day with your mother every year since we were married," said Jim, "I see no reason to alter the arrangement."

"Specially this year," Anne said quickly, noting Cicely's set lips; "she'll be all alone if we don't."

"And," added Jim, "perhaps you haven't noticed—your mother's gone a bit to pieces lately."

Cicely sat very straight at the top of the table, her eyes expressionless as she looked at Jim over the bowl of expensive hot-house roses.

"It must be convenient to be a doctor," she said in a hard voice. "Whenever you want to push a point home, or get your own way, you've only to invent a fresh illness for somebody, and everyone falls in with your suggestions."

"Oh," Anne gasped, "that's not fair."

Jim, still patient, enquired, "What do you want to do, Snooks?"

"Lady Harvey has asked us all there. I don't see

why mother can't come to us. It would do her good. She ought not to be encouraged to stay down in the country by herself. Who wants to go to that desolate place in the middle of the winter? I don't for one—I've had enough of it in my life."

There was a silence. Anne remained quietly unhappy, waiting for Jim to say something.

Suddenly, with no warning, he dropped his bombshell. Without raising his voice, as if he were announcing he was going to the Club, he said:

"I'm sorry about that. They rang me up from the County Hospital to-day to say that Rigby has gone down with typhoid and they want me to fill the gap. I'm going to Barty to-morrow."

"You mean you're throwing up your work here?" Cicely gave the impression of expectancy more than surprise.

"Yes, that's what I do mean. I shan't be missed. I can carry on with it down there just as well."

"You won't have time for much research if you do the routine hospital work," she said with frozen calm.

"P'raps not, but I feel I'm needed there. I know the work and I can pick up the threads. They've got a diphtheria epidemic—lots of contacts to swab."

He was not the least apologetic. This fact impressed itself on Cicely as she warned herself to go carefully. The crisis had come—the parting of the ways. This was what she had unconsciously been waiting for all these weeks. Some sign, some indication as to the line she should take.

"Haven't you given up rather soon? You've only just got the work started, how can you leave it now?"

"That's for me to decide."

Anne, noting the colourless face, the dark eyes heavy behind the horn rims, realized the strain on his self-control.

"What do you propose I shall do?" Cicely took a peach from a dish.

"That's for you to decide."

Pushing back her chair, Anne got up.

"I'd better go," she said, "and leave you two to talk."

Neither of them heard her.

Cicely's heart beat wildly now that the danger point was no near.

"Are you trying to tell me you don't care what I do?"

He bent low over the apple he was peeling.

"Now you're being foolish," he said softly. "You're making mountains out of molehills. It's just this, Snooks. They want me there—urgently, and I want to go. This research work here is all very well but any man with the leisure and a certain amount of ability can do it."

"It's just an excuse," she said angrily, "to get away. You don't think about me or what I want to do. You haven't given it a fair trial."

"All that's beside the point." He talked with unswerving patience. "I'm cut out for an ordinary working pathologist and bacteriologist—that's my job and I know it. I'm sorry if you find me a dull dog and a prosaic one, but you see, I think life here *is* dull—dull and worthless. My work means much more than that to me—I dare say I'm not explaining myself very well—but I don't feel justified in just hanging round your skirt-tails, while you enjoy yourself."

"Good heavens, hanging round. But you've been

working all day and every day at St. Mildred's. I've scarcely seen anything of you."

"No," he said with a quiet smile, "that's true. We've scarcely seen anything of each other."

"And," she went on, "enjoying myself!"

"Oh, well, I know you drug your conscience with charity work. But you're not really happy, Snooks. You don't belong in London, you're essentially a country woman. No wild flower will thrive in London. I'm not talking of health, particularly. But it takes years of sophistication and other hardening processes to eradicate that kind of direct simplicity which has been born in your people for generations. You inherited it. You can spend your money and have a far better time in the country amongst people of your own kind, than here. So come along back with me. You can take a bigger house if you need it and you can keep a horse or two and have a good garden and come up and down when you want, and lead an orderly and peaceful existence, instead of this hectic, frantic rush to waste time. And you can help with the village charities and the hospital. The kind of people you know here will never be real friends to you; I wish I could make you see that. It's not that they're not capable of friendship, but you'll never get really close to them, simply because they don't understand you and you them. They're used to lots of casual people flowing in and out of their ken, and they only demand that these people shall be amusing and have a big enough income to return hospitality. But you want something more, you want them almost to swear allegiance to you, and you long to be part of their existence. I can see it. I heard you talking to Lady Harvey on the telephone the other day, and you seemed quite injured because she had

not told you she was having a dinner party that night, and then you were hurt because you hadn't been asked. You can behave like that to the vicar's wife at home, but you'll never get away with it with Lady Harvey, however long you know her. She and people like her haven't time for that kind of absorbing friendship. I'm not sure that the whole key to the situation is that when people live in crowds they become intensely individual and independent and perhaps secretive, merely for the sake of self-protection. Anne, oddly enough, although she prefers the country, is much more suitable to this life than you. She can enter into it and yet remain outside, whereas you want to identify yourself, body and soul, with it all, and it's a mistake, dear. You'll be frightfully disappointed."

She sat, chin cupped in her hands staring at him while he talked, but thinking how far, how very far he was from the truth. He had an inhuman instinct for bringing things down to brass tacks. Romance, thrills, excitements, enthusiasm had no place in Jim's life or thoughts. That fact was obvious. And he had missed the capacity for these things in her. Passed them by as non-existent. She was still young, or at least old-young or young-old, as Miles had expressed it only the other day. She hadn't done any of the things she meant to do yet. Next year there would be all the fixtures she had looked forward to—Wimbledon, Eton and Harrow, Henley, Ascot. Of course, she could do them from Barty, Jim would argue. Jim could argue a great deal, of course, and always miss the real point—which was Miles. The idea of deliberately going away from him was quite absurd—impossible, not to be contemplated for one moment. Jim did not think life was given to you to be enjoyed

and made the most of—he apparently looked on it as a hardship to be borne.

When he had finished his unusually long speech, he looked across at her still face, as she sat there, and when she said nothing, he got up from his place and came to her, putting his arm round her and pressed her fair head to him.

“I’m right, Snooks, I know it in my bones. It’s the best thing for both of us. Anyway, give it a trial. You won’t find life so dull in the country now you’ve got money.”

“Do you mean you’re not coming back here. Even when Rigby’s better?” she demanded, still staring in front of her.

He hesitated. “Well, it’s hard to say, but . . . as a matter of fact,” he went on quickly now, “Rigby may not come back. In that case they may offer me the job again.”

“And just because you don’t like it here and because you prefer the country and muddling along, you expect me to throw up everything and follow you. And you try to tell yourself and me it’s your duty. You’re just utterly selfish. You don’t consider me one scrap.”

“It’s not that exactly,” he said miserably, feeling he was not handling the situation properly. “It’s more than that. It’s my very existence. Can’t you see?”

Pushing him away, she got up from her chair and faced him.

“No,” she said. “No, Jim. You’re just a moral coward. I don’t believe I count with you a bit. You want your own way—you always have. All this talk about doing your duty about Mr. Crispin’s money—and now you’re giving up all thought of that. If you don’t

want me any more, say so——” She was crying now, hurt and surprised at his attitude, remembering how hard she had tried to be loyal to him during the last months, and spare him in every way. “You don’t love me any more, that’s it.”

“Darling, don’t. Do try to put yourself in my position. With women, love is the beginning and end of everything. It’s different with a man—it can’t be the chief thing—especially a man like me. It’s important, of course, and I hate the idea of being separated from you even for a short time, but I can’t sacrifice everything that makes life worth living for me, just to be near you. I’ve tried—and I can’t do it.”

“You never wanted to succeed—you’ve got no ambition, no driving power, and you try to put the blame on me.”

She was too angry now to notice how tired and beaten he looked.

“You may be right,” he said wearily, “but this stupid publicity business has taken the kick out of the thing for me. The only purpose for going on was Colin, but now . . .”

“But there are thousands like him,” she cried wildly, “thousands to save. Just think.”

“I can carry on just as well in the country. There I shan’t have interference from stupid chattering women. I can start on a new line.”

His dogged determination suddenly impressed itself on her. She grew cold with fear. If only she could rouse him to anger or some kind of feeling for her, it would be different. But he just stood about, being quietly reasonable and undemonstrative and patient—a stranger, certainly not the husband she had known for years.

"You want me to be a research genius, or a fashionable quack in the news, so you can exploit me and show me off, I know. But I'm not. I can't help it. So there you are."

"You don't understand, Jim. I can't—I won't come and live down there, cut off from people and music and happenings. It's too much to ask. If you really cared for me, you'd stay here, with me."

"I s'pose," his voice was deadly quiet. "I s'pose it hasn't occurred to you that I might not like living on money which I haven't earned. When I threw up my job at the hospital and with it the consultant's fees, I became dependent more or less on you, Snooks. Perhaps I could have put up with it better if our relations had been the same as they used to be, if we were both working for the common good. But they're not, so there you are. It's impossible to go on like this. You're like a child, you want to eat your cake and keep it, too."

"What do you mean?" Her manner was scared and odd. Did he know about Miles—was that what he meant? Now that he had acknowledged the distance between them she wanted agonizingly to bridge it. At that moment, at any rate, she didn't despise him. He had gained her respect, because he was her slave no more and stood alone, demanding nothing of her and giving nothing.

"Think it over, my dear," he said, and left her.

When the door was shut, she called: "Jim, come back. I want to tell you something—Jim!"

But he did not come back, and when Bennett came with Amber, she had dried her eyes and regained her usual self-control. As she stroked Amber's head, there was a queer, trance-like stare in her eyes, Bennett told

cook afterwards, as if she'd been seeing ghosts or something—not like her, one little bit. A cold fish, she considered her. Too ladylike to even be upset at that poor dear Colin. Cook remarked that “deep rivers ran still,” and you never could tell how deep they were, and that Bennett's cocoa was ready, and that she'd seen the doctor stump into that lab. looking as if he was going to murder some of those there microbes.

“More likely they'll murder him,” Bennett said darkly, “or us. I often wonder what 'ud happen if he let some of them loose out of them tubes by mistake. Do they crawl or fly, Mrs. Bett?”

“Both, I should say,” said Cook curtly, “when they want to get a move on. You don't catch me going near that chamber of 'orrors—nor 'er, either. She 'ates it, I 'eard her say so, and no wonder. I wonder she puts up with it—I do, indeed. She ain't cut out for a doctor's wife.”

“Call that doctoring, Mrs. Bett, fiddling about with insects and creepy, crawly things? I don't. Might just as well be a jumping flea trainer, for all the good he does. He does it at the hospital, too. That's how they waste the public money in institutions.”

“Ssh——” said Cook. “It's 'er money, I believe. That's what makes 'er so high and mighty. She was as poor as a church mouse when they lived in the country. I 'eard 'er talking to Miss Anne the other day. Hadn't a stitch to 'er back, not that that matters overmuch in the country—they all go about just anyhow.”

“Poor Miss Anne,” Bennett sighed, “I like her. She's really posh, she is, and no airs and graces in spite of being a ladyship. Handsome young man, Peter was. He gave me a glad eye once or twice. In a nice way, you

know, and all that ; still it cheered me up and made me feel I wasn't on the shelf yet, you know."

"Yes, I know." Cook nodded in complete agreement.

Cicely went to find Anne. She discovered her restlessly pondering round her room, the *Times* crossword in her hand.

"Trying a little mental uplift," she said as cheerfully as she could. "Not that it's much good. I can't do a single word and I look years older."

"Yes," Cicely said, "you do look older. But perhaps it's the black clothes and the crossword."

"No, it's not the clothes, it's me. I am older, too—after all, you can't go through the experience of being married, if only for a week-end, and not feel it. Oh, heavens, Cicely, my child, out with it. Don't stand there looking frozen. Better tell me."

"It's Jim, he doesn't care any more for me." Anne swiftly took in the state of mind Cicely was in and decided to be cruel.

"Well, you don't really mind, do you? What are you going to do?"

"Do you think that—that he doesn't want me any more?" Cicely stood in the middle of the large room, her white dress sweeping round her, her eyes wide open, full of mournful appeal. Anne, unmindful of her black dinner frock, crushed herself in an armchair, and thought how lovely her sister looked and how utterly feminine.

"Naturally, he hasn't said anything to me. I often think it must be a bore to be a man, because you can't confide in anyone. Not like you and me, for instance, because it's considered dishonourable and not playing

the game to discuss your wife. Not that they want to, of course."

Cicely, unusually supersensitive to-night, broke in: "Oh, well, if you don't think I ought to talk about Jim to you, I won't."

"You'd better," Anne spoke more softly now, "if you want to. Only I do think Jim's right to go back to Barty. After all, he's not getting much of a show here, is he, with Miles in the offing all the time?"

"But if he goes away, he's just pushing me on to Miles."

"Provided he knows of the Miles danger, which I don't think he does."

"I've a good mind to tell him, to let him see there is someone who cares about me and my wishes, even if he doesn't. Perhaps that would make him realize."

"It would certainly make you realize."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Cicely, I don't want to be beastly, but you must look the future in the face. Tantrums and being nettled with Jim are all very well, but you're up against a stiff proposition—I don't think you imagine how stiff. You see, you aren't a young girl in love—you're a married woman committing a sin in the eyes of the law and the church. You think you've been self-sacrificing where Jim is concerned; other people might say you were shielding behind your husband because you hadn't the courage to be open."

Cicely sat down on the bed suddenly and began to laugh nervously. "Are you quoting from some Edwardian novel, or are you just making fun of me?"

"No, I'm perfectly serious." Anne's thin arms circled her knee as she frowned and considered. "You

see, the crowd I go around with have got the usual attitude towards sex. You find it in most plays and lots of books, and I thought it was a good idea myself once. You know, the usual get rid of repression theory at all costs, and if you desire someone it's bad for you not to give in to it. One thing to be said for it is that the idea is shared and carried out by men and women alike, whereas our Victorian grandfathers used to pander to their animal instincts (they didn't call them repressions) furtively with ladies of the town and our grandmothers had to stay repressed all their lives. I thought it out a lot, specially when I understood that as a married woman I should have to face the possibility of Harmony being a powerful nuisance. Now what I think is this : you've got to call a spade a spade and be fair. You told me you didn't look upon yourself as Miles' mistress. Well, you are. Would you mind if Jim had a mistress ?”

“I never thought of such a thing. Jim would never do anything like that, it would put me in an awful position. But I told you before, I've only been seeing Miles secretly to spare Jim.”

Anne smiled, but the hint of satire on her lips entirely escaped Cicely. “In fact you think your great love for Miles excuses everything. But you know, Cicely dear, I don't honestly believe Jim would thank you for that. After all, why should you pity him so much, just because he's in danger of being deprived of your company ? Of course, the money, I mustn't forget that.”

“He depends on me—he always has.”

“But not so much now, does he ?” Anne pointed out. “To-night ought to show you that. But what I really want to tell you, is that it's no use your trying to put a

modern outlook on your affair with Miles, because really you've got a completely Victorian one—one-sided, no mutual understanding, and swamped in sentiment. You look upon yourself as a Beatrice or a Juliet, a lot of women do, I've noticed it, and you think there's something fine about you. All the time it's passion you need, pure and simple."

"Anne!"

"Honestly it is, Cicely. When I say passion, I mean all its trimmings as well—glamour, excitement, uncertainties, oh, and everything. But all the time, mind you, you've really got a guilty conscience. You know in your heart of hearts it's all wrong, but you say to yourself that lots of women are doing the same, so why shouldn't you. You're trying to combine Victorian beliefs and principles with modern scepticism. What you forget is that these days you must be prepared to 'pass along quickly, please,' and share too, for that matter."

"For heaven's sake, Anne, don't go on. Talk, talk. I'm so tired. First Jim and then you. And it's all so silly, really. I hate your analysing—I told you before. You don't help me a bit. I don't know why or what I am. I just know that Jim wants to go his own way and I've got to make up my mind what to do. But I'm not going to Barty."

Anne looked up quickly. "I am, you know. After Christmas, I shan't come back here."

"Oh," Cicely's voice was small. "What about Ernest? I thought you didn't want to be near him."

"I wouldn't choose to be. It will be difficult, but I've got to. Mother wants me, and she's not fit, so I'm going."

"You'll be bored to tears doing nothing."

"Not more bored than doing something all the time. Besides, gardening and walking and seeing, amuse me. I can't help it, Cicely, I just feel at the moment I want time to stand and stare. I always have, I think, and you can't do that in London, you'd get run into or run in."

"I see," Cicely's head went up, "you're against me, too."

"I'm not against you, dear, only I don't seem to be able to do any good by staying here any longer. I daresay I've been talking a lot of rot. After all, as far as I can see, there's only one person who can help you."

"You mean Miles?"

"Yes."

"I know," Cicely said. A tiny smile curled round her mouth. "I've known that all the evening."

XIV

JIM went off next morning in a hurry and bustle. Cicely came out of her room just as Bennett was putting his suit-cases in his car. She could not pretend she hadn't known he was packing. That was one real snag about flats, the close quarters. Doors opening and shutting, Bennett being rung for, questions put, shoes asked for. No, certainly a flat was no place for a quarrel or estrangement, the personality of the other being was too evident.

"Oh, there you are, Snooks! I was just going to say 'Good-bye.'" He kissed her on the cheek. "In an awful hurry. I'll ring you up to-night."

"I shan't be in," she answered coldly.

"Oh, well, I'll ring to-morrow, then. Take care of yourself."

She made no reply to his attempt at cheeriness.

He got into the car and let down the window. The engine was already running. She stood at the door, Amber by her side.

"See you at Christmas," he shouted as the car shot forward.

Cicely went straight to the telephone in her room and dialled Miles' number. His voice answered.

"Miles, can I see you to-night?"

"To-night! Why—what's happened? You sound dismal."

"I am."

"Well—it's difficult. How about lunch?"

She hesitated. "No, I'm busy. Why not to-night?"

"I'm engaged." His tone was final.

"Is it important?"

"Yes, it is rather. Why, dear, we're meeting to-morrow, anyhow."

"I know—I know." Now she was flurried, upset, not being able to bear the thought of suspense. "But it's urgent—very. What are you doing?"

"Well"—his voice was regretful. "I am supposed to be turning up at the Wine Club dinner—I promised."

Bearing in mind his acknowledged servitude to his tummy, she realized the importance of this engagement, but still persisted.

"I'm so sorry, darling, but I must talk to you."

"Oh, very well!" She detected a resigned sigh. "I'll cut it."

"It's sweet of you. Shall I call for you about half-past seven?"

"Yes—not changed. I'm working late."

Relieved she put down the ear-piece. Then immediately the bell rang. She lifted it again. A voice said:

"Is that Mrs. Furguson?"

"Yes."

"It's Enid Faulkner speaking. May I come to see you this morning? I've something important to tell you."

"I'm sorry—I shan't be in."

"Oh, well, perhaps I can see your sister. It's really more interesting to her. May I speak to her?"

"She's not fit, you know. All the trouble she's had

lately has made her quite ill. We shall both be glad to see you a little later—after Christmas, shall we say ? ”

“ I’m afraid that won’t do. I think you’d better let me come this morning.”

Cicely thought rapidly and came to the conclusion that Enid was too dangerous to offend.

“ Oh, very well then. I’ll cancel my date.”

“ Good. I’m speaking from the Hampstead Tube Station. I shall be there in a very short time.”

She went slowly to Anne’s room and found her still in bed. She sat down on the blue silk coverlet and said gravely :

“ Anne, I want you to keep out of the way a bit this morning. Stay in bed.”

“ Is Miles coming here ? If so, I’m going out.” She was ready to spring out of bed.

“ No, I’m seeing him to-night. Will you promise ? ”

“ Yes—I s’pose so. I don’t care. Expect you’ve got a lot on hand. Did you have a mouldy night too ? I heard Jim go off this morning. Gosh ! what a miserable mess it all is. I can’t help it, Cicely, I feel done—sunk. It’s Colin—I miss him so much.”

“ I know, darling, and Peter too—you must.”

Anne wrinkled her forehead. “ Funny, isn’t it, but I don’t so much. P’raps it’s because it all went by so quickly—like a flash. It seems a dream now—our engagement and wedding and everything. Just a frolic. You know, I believe being married to Peter would always have been like that—a frolic—not real somehow. He was such a dear—so sweet to me. And now you’re going to make a mess of your life,” she added slowly.

“ A mess ? Why do you say that ? ”

"I don't know. P'raps you won't though. You're saner than I am. You're guided by your instincts more. I try to make things happen my way, force things. I'm never, never going to do it again. I shall just lie down and take my licking."

"Poor child. Well, I must go." She got up.

Anne suddenly smiled mischievously. "I say, you know, I'd give my eyes to be there when you talk to Miles to-night. No, don't be cross, dear, but tell me—how do you think he'll take it all?"

A swift, helpless expression shadowed Cicely's eyes and was replaced by a guarded one.

"He'll understand, of course," she said non-committally, "he's the most understanding person I know."

"A nasty one for me," Anne said with a wry smile. "But then I don't know much about Miles."

"How does he strike you then?"

Anne thought a second and then said: "I think he's a born bachelor—he gives me that impression."

"Oh!"—Again that helpless uncertain look. Then: "I don't think you're right."

Enid Faulkner, perfectly dressed as usual, with expensive furs, looked round the room as she came in. Her voice was soft as she greeted Cicely.

"Are you pleased with it? I do hope you are. I did my best."

"I know you did."

"Then you don't like it—much. I'm sorry. But perhaps your mood has changed. I expect it has after that dreadful accident. Both so young—it seems such utter waste."

She sat down by the fire. Cicely offered her a cigarette and matches, noting her slim legs and her beautiful shoes, long and narrow.

"It's ages since I saw you." Enid talked easily, unembarrassed, "and you're looking so fit. I thought perhaps you and Anne would have come down to Barty while I was there. Still I'm not surprised you gave it a miss—absolutely deadly—awful hole."

"Don't you like it?" Cicely said in her chair tense and quiet, waiting for what was to come.

"My dear—can you imagine me liking it? Nothing to do, no one to see or talk to. You might as well be deaf, dumb and blind, for all the use your senses are. No wonder you were scheming to come to London to have a good time. I sympathize with you. Anyway I don't want to see the place again. I've shaken the dust from that awful village street off for ever, I hope."

Cicely was now extremely interested and showed it. "Have you? And what about Ernest?"

"Heavens, no! He'll never leave it. He goes mooning round looking at a few dead bare branches and talks about the loveliness of winter trees and chats to the farmers and local tradesmen as if they were the only brilliant and witty people in the world. And then he goes home and draws them. They don't know it, of course."

"I s'pose he's got to get copy from somewhere," said Cicely just for something to say.

"Yes, I s'pose so. He won't come back to London and I won't go on living there. It's a dreadful situation. I've got an offer to go to America too."

"Are you going?"

"I would if I had a little capital to start with. You

see"—she moved in her chair and leant towards Cicely—"Ernest doesn't care tuppence about me or what I do. He did his best to be nice when I insisted on going back to live with him, and after all, what's the good of a husband if you don't make use of him, and I was hard up. He can't help it—he just doesn't care about me any more. We were too young when we married, you know. I realize it all and I'd release him if I could. But we must live and we haven't a halfpenny between us."

"I thought he was doing well."

"My dear, you know what artists are. Doing well means they've just got enough to scrape along with—for one—not for two."

Still Cicely sat—waiting. The fire crackled between them.

"Why I really came this morning was to ask you if you could help me—lend me some money. I thought of you," she went on rapidly, "because I knew you wouldn't miss it and because it would do others a good turn as well as me."

- A panic seized Cicely now. She wished Anne was there.

"In what way do you mean?" She must get the thing clear.

"Well," Enid shrugged her furred shoulders, "I've always understood that Anne was frightfully in love with my husband, and now that you know what it's like to be keen on someone I thought you'd understand and want to assist."

A horrible silence followed this announcement, broken at last by Cicely.

"What makes you imagine these things?"

"Good heavens, I'm not a fool! I guessed by Anne's

manner, the very first time I met her. She took no pains to hide how much she disliked me. Then I made enquiries in the village—listened to the charwoman's harmless chatter—you know. Besides your mother quite unconsciously gave herself away when I went to tea. She was so pleased to think Ernest had his wife there to keep him out of mischief. They were not her words exactly, as you can imagine."

"But Anne was very young then—she's changed now, you know. After all, she married——"

Enid smiled ironically. "Yes," she said softly, "she married, but then so did you—so did I. But what interests me more than anything is what you're going to do about *your* young man."

"Really——" Cicely got to her feet, indignant and humiliated, on the defensive. "What right have you to come here like this and ask me questions about my private affairs?"

"But they're not private, you know—not in the least. That's just it. I've come as a friend to tell you—to warn you. Few people want to know about your griefs and sorrows and money troubles, but when it comes to love you can't keep it secret."

"I don't understand," Cicely muttered, stupidly wondering what to do, what to say. Women talked and gossiped, of course, but this situation was intolerable in every day life—like a melodrama.

"Don't you? Of course you know your husband better than anybody. I only saw him once or twice when I was working here while you were in France. But it occurred to me that he is not the kind of man who would be willing to share a woman—that is, of course, if he was aware of it. Am I right?"

"That's entirely my affair," Cicely answered obstinately, "Nothing to do with anybody but me."

"Then you'd admit to him that you have a lover?"

Cicely blushed hotly at the word. "I don't admit anything," she said angrily. "I won't discuss my feelings with you or anybody. You and your friends can think what you like about me. I really don't mind it—especially after this."

Enid smiled as she slowly collected her bag and got out of the low chair.

"My dear, you're being awfully foolish to get into such a state. Who cares what you do, or what boy friends you have, or who you go to France with except, possibly, Dr. Jim? And I thought it might be awkward for you if he got to know. That's all. Perhaps I'm wrong."

She came and patted Cicely's hand as it lay on the back of a chair. "I'm sorry I've made you cross, but I thought perhaps you'd have talked it over with me. I haven't been very tactful, I'm afraid, to ruffle you like this—especially when I really came to ask you to lend me some money, you remember. It would be so marvellous to be able to go right out of England—and stay there. You do think I've a flair for interior decorations—don't you?" She demanded the last pleadingly, as if she thought Cicely's considered opinion worth having. "Of course I do see now, that leather is a bit out of place in your present mood. I should have stuck to the discreet modern Victorianism trend—I hesitated at the time."

Now she pulled out her lipstick and mirror and outlined her lips. While she was doing it, without

raising her eyes, she said: "Five thousand seems so little really when you've got it, and when you haven't it's the devil. Absurd to think that not having it can prevent you from starting a new sort of life and future altogether. But there it is!" She slipped the lipstick into her bag. "Well, I must be going. By the way, since I came back from Barty, I've been sharing a flat with Vivienne. She's so disappointed you haven't been to her salon lately and she wasn't given the chance to dress you in black. She says you are just the subject for it. She wonders if she's offended you. She says the last dress she did for you was the one you wore when you flew over to France in the summer. Her buyer was thrilled to see how lovely you looked in it. By the way, here's Vivienne's private address and telephone number. You may like to have it by you. Do you think your maid could ring for a taxi—you're such miles away from anywhere—aren't you?"

Cicely felt she had stood by like a stuffed goose long enough. She was so frightened at the turn the conversation had taken that she thought the less she said the better. She needed time to think, but the chief necessity was to get this horrible woman out of the house.

"The car is at the door," she said, "I'll drive you to the tube if that will do. The taxi rank's a long way from here."

Her coat was luckily in the hall. Without waiting to find a hat, she conducted Enid to the car. During the drive to the station neither of them spoke. It was Enid who said the last word, as she got out.

"Thank you so much for the lift. Ring me up soon. Good-bye, then."

Almost alike an omen, Cicely thought, as she drove back. First Jim with "Shall see you at Christmas," now Enid. So little either of them knew about her, and yet they tried to pretend to be so certain she'd fall in with their wishes. She hated most the idea that her love for Miles should be trailed in the dust, laughed and joked about—discussed by those beastly-minded women, so promiscuous themselves, so revolting in their attitude towards men, so clever with the under-currents of their talk. Heaps and heaps of things she might have said if only she'd had the presence of mind. On the whole she had put up a pretty poor show. No retaliation—no fight. Still, what was there to say? Enid's meaning had been perfectly clear. She was tired and weary with all this awful talk. Nobody understanding or giving her a thought. All trying to twist her round their fingers to straighten out their own involved affairs. Anne—yes, what about her? Still why bother about Anne? She, too, was only thinking of herself. She must work out her own life now that she had so definitely shown she wanted to. Then back to Miles—thank heaven for Miles. The one person in the world who understood and cared, and he the one person who had a definite right to blame and disapprove of her. After all, it was his money she had used to try and smooth out all their troubles for them—Anne, Jim—yes, and Colin too. There was only one thing she could do to make amends. If she and Miles were married he would have the use of the money and that was as it should be.

She found Anne still in bed and sound asleep when she crept into her room. At lunch time when she went again no mention was made of Enid's visit, so she pre-

sumed that Anne was not going to ask questions about her caller.

When she arrived at Miles' flat she had worked herself into an extraordinary state of mind. Anxiety and doubt struggled with resolve, and yet an undercurrent of hopeless anger with Jim ran beneath her fast moving thoughts. It was of him she thought all the time as she sat tense and still in the taxi on her way. Once or twice she deliberately tried to turn her thoughts away, because now she must disassociate herself with him; cut away her background, which was Jim, and stand alone, a separate entity.

Miles' flat, warm and cosy, restored her confidence somewhat. She looked round the now familiar room and at Miles standing in front of the huge wood fire—large and smiling and said:

"Oh, at last! It's nice to be here."

He came towards her then and took her cold hands.

"What is it, dear one—what is it?"

The tender softness of his voice pierced her heart.

"Oh, Miles! I'm so lost—at sea. It's awful!"

"What on earth's happened, my dear, you're shaking. Come and sit down."

"Did you mind my coming? I had to. So sorry to ask you to put off your dinner."

"Darling, that's nothing. Now I'll give you a cocktail and you can tell me what's wrong. Or would you like dinner first?"

"No—no—I'm not hungry. Miles—it's this: Jim has gone back to Barty—to work at the hospital. Perhaps for always. And he wants me to go back and live there—give up the flat."

"Gone—already? But I don't see . . ."

"They rang up. Rigby, the man who took on his work when he came to London, is ill. Jim has stepped into the gap. He went this morning. He only told me about it last night and more or less held a pistol at my head."

"I see." He turned and lit a cigarette and then came to stand beside her as she sat in the big armchair, stroking her fair head. She could not see his face.

"So you see," she went on, "it means that if I don't go it will be a definite break. He's never really liked being in London, and this is an excuse for getting away—giving it all up—even the research work."

Still he said nothing. She could just feel his fingers in her hair.

"And I don't know what to do." Her voice was low and muffled.

"What do you want to do?" he asked at last.

She reached up and grasped his wrist. "If I go and live in the country—I—you—we can't meet—can we? Don't you see that? And I hate it so—the life there—all of it."

"Yes—but darling—you've always said you couldn't hurt Jim—don't you remember—the very first time?"

"But it's different now—all changed. He doesn't want me any longer, he doesn't care—he can't, or he wouldn't just go like that without even consulting me, so why should I consider him? Why should I? It isn't reasonable, is it?"

"It's hard for me to say. But in a way I do see Jim's point of view."

Impossible now to go on without seeing his face. She slowly got out of her chair and stood by the fire, her black dress clinging to her body. She had become much

slimmer lately and developed a graceful poise of movement. Miles told her so now as he watched her.

"Darling—you look so lovely," he added in a voice that always weakened her, and taking her into his arms he held her tight.

Suddenly, it was easier for her to talk, her cheek pressed to his. "I don't want to go away, I feel I can't. You mean so much—you're part of my life now—aren't you? You're the only person I know who understands, darling, and if you want me"—her voice sank to a whisper—"I'll stay with you always and always."

Too occupied with her own emotion to notice his silence, intent only on saying what she had come to say, she whispered on: "You see, then the money—your money—would be useful to you. I've always felt guilty about it—ever since I knew you—I mean."

"Hush, my dear. I've told you not to talk about that. I've put it out of my mind. You can make better use of it than I can. I want you to understand that I have enough. After all, if I had really counted on it I shouldn't have put my father's back up merely for the fun of contradicting him on a subject which I'm quite keen on but really not fanatical about. I do feel very doubtful whether animals who, after all, are sensitive to physical pain, should be sacrificed to humans, and I . . ."

Cicely now was wishing she had not started this particular subject—disconcerting this wandering away from the vital part of her announcement. She knew by experience that odd quality of his brain, which pinned down a train of thought and then pursued it with concentration. She felt she had lost touch with his

tenderness and sentiment and gropingly tried to regain it by saying: "I know—I know, darling, but all that doesn't really matter now—does it? Not even the money. But . . ."

"Yes—I know." He released her and took her hands. "Darling—I'm honoured and frightfully touched by what you said, specially as it's you. I know what an effort it has been to come here and offer what you've offered. But dear, it wouldn't make you any happier. I couldn't make you happy—I know."

"Don't say that—it's not true. I know myself, Miles."

"Listen, dear. I've wanted to say what I'm going to say for a long time. You see, my dear, you're essentially a home maker. Adventure is not in your bones. I realized that almost as soon as we began. You want to possess—a child—a man—it doesn't matter which. This sort of thing is not for the likes of you. I'm sorry," he went on in a quiet monotone, looking over her shoulder, ignoring the hurt, nervous pressure of her arms—"I don't want a woman in my life. Perhaps because I've never had a mother or sister in it. I'm used to being by myself. I can't help looking on women as delightful diversions—that's all. I can't say of any one woman—'that is the one woman in all the world I love and need and want to be with all my life.'—You attract me and I'm fond of you, darling, but that's not enough for you. I know how you want to know my thoughts—actions—in fact, absorb me."

"But you were engaged once," she said, helplessly, stunned by this self-revelation.

"That began when I was younger. Now I've reached middle age, when nothing touches me very deeply,

I'm afraid. Besides she was a very independent young woman. If we had married our lives would have remained separate—they would not have merged, if you see what I mean, except at the edge. I still believe she is the only woman I've ever met I could think of marrying. I know this must be hurting you horribly, but there it is. I'm to blame for seeking you out. I happened to be lonely at the time and thought you were just another woman with not much to do and slightly bored by your husband, who needed some diversion—colour in her life. I knew you were not experienced, of course, but it didn't occur to me you'd take it so seriously."

"It isn't fair," she answered, bitterly sad. "There must be heaps of women like me, you ought to know that. You pretend you know such a lot about women. Heaps of women who don't look on love as an adventure, or a game—or an episode, but just want to give all they can to the one man they care about. I expect lots of them are lucky enough to find the real thing when they marry—but I have never really been in love with Jim. I know that women are often blamed for encouraging men and then letting them down, but I believe men do it much much more, and they hurt more too, because a woman can't fight her feelings as easily as a man."

"Hush, dear, don't cry. You know you are wrong about Jim. You may not be in love with him at the moment, but you do love him. Why, the very wish not to give him a moment's anxiety shows that. You've been trying hard to shield him from worry ever since I met you. Think of me kindly, Cicely. I'm not a monster, you know—just a very ordinary man with one

5.

failing—a colossal one from your point of view—that I'm not the man you thought I was—and I'm sorry I've failed you."

"I don't know what to do—what shall I do?" she asked pathetically. She was weeping now openly, with no restraint.

Realising his inadequacy to deal with the situation, and with growing doubts about his own conduct, he became impatient.

"The best thing for you to do is to go and look after Jim, or if you don't want to do that, perhaps you'll care for someone else in time, Cicely dear. You're so sweet—I've often told you."

A sickly smile accompanied this remark. It was intended to raise the conversation from the serious to a lighter tone.

"Miles!" Her shocked voice rang through the room. "You don't know what you're saying. You're being cruel. You can't mean it!"

"Of course I don't mean it, my dear. Only I want you to stop crying and not be so upset. I can't bear it! And yet it's quite true that in a year or two's time you'll have stopped bothering about me. I'll always be your friend, and if you go to live in the country you can come up here sometimes and we'll meet. But I don't suppose you'll want to. I shall love to see you—darling."

Something in his voice made her raise her head, and for the first time that evening she realized that in his way he did care for her, that it had not been easy to say the things he had said. His hair was tumbled, his tie crooked. Tremulously she stroked back the fine wisps into their place and neatened the tie. Then again her

arms went round him and she clung with all her strength. "Miles—Miles—I can't—I can't!"

"There—there—try and listen, Cicely dear. We must think of the future—perhaps a lifetime—at least the rest of our lives—and I know, I'm convinced you wouldn't find me satisfactory. I told you before I'm inconstant and you'd be jealous, and I honestly can't bear the idea of the responsibilities of family life. I haven't the least desire for fatherhood, and you—dear—you ought to have children. Just meeting me for dinners and theatres is all very well, but everyday life is very different—isn't it? You have a great capacity for going through the day gracefully and efficiently. Night life with its stupid artificialities and forced stimulus is honestly not your frame. But you see, I don't need a helper or companion for my everyday life. There, now I'm talking too much and only worrying you. Now come along, go and tidy and we'll have some dinner and we can talk about your plans."

Shattered, dejected, she obediently went to the bathroom. The end—there was a finality about the things Miles had said. She had lost him. A fathomless hopelessness usurped her senses. Automatically she powdered her face, carefully. She could fight no more—she didn't even want to. The fact loomed up that he did not need her—she had degraded herself in her own eyes. He was now no longer the same person—his identity was lost in the explanations of himself. All the time while she had deluded herself that he cared, those ideas about himself and her had been corroding in his mind and she hadn't even guessed. Elusive—yes—but not so utterly insincere and detached. Why, she hadn't really touched his deeper feelings at all.

Surface sentiment came easy to him. All this began to dawn on her as she went through the ritual of tidying, but not coherently at first. It was only during the succeeding days that these germs of realization and blinding truth reached their full proportions.

She was very tired and showed it in her step as she went back to the sitting-room. Miles watched her carefully as she came towards him, her attention on her gloves as she put them on.

"I'm ready," she said listlessly.

"I'll get my hat," he said without emotion. Then suddenly he pleaded: "Cicely, my darling, don't—don't take it to heart like this."

"It's all right," she answered in a low voice, "Quite all right."

"God, you make me feel a swine! But what am I to do?—I can't help it."

"No, you can't help it," she repeated, and went on pulling at her gloves. — —

He hesitated, then with a muttered "Oh Lord!" went out of the room. As Cicely stood there looking at a slit she had made in the seam of her glove, her thoughts went to Jim. She wondered if he was working at the hospital. A picture of him rose—sitting under the brilliant laboratory lights working at his microscope, intent and entirely stable and trustworthy. A sob rose in her throat. She was a cast-off mistress—nothing more. She had given her love and herself entirely, thinking they were longed-for treasures, but they had amounted to nothing. Miles only needed from her what he could get from a dozen other women—probably deep down he didn't even respect her. She was prepared to think anything of him now. A diversion—she shivered.

She supposed it would be more dignified to go now—this moment, but she couldn't leave him like that. She had grown so accustomed to leaning on him and seeking his advice.

He came back with his coat on. "Shall we go?" he said. She went towards the door. He caught her up and said "Cicely."

"Yes?"

"Kiss me."

Obediently she raised her cold, quiet lips. He kissed her without passion.

"Try not to think hard things about me, Cicely dear. I'll always be your friend."

She turned from him to hide her tears and went out of the door to the lift.

XV

ANNE stepped through the casement window. "I had to come," she said. She shut the door behind her. Outside it was snowing.

Ernest Faulkner emerged from a big arm chair by the fire.

"Anne, my dear." He came to her and took off her fur gloves and the snow-covered beret and shook them.

"You'll spoil the rugs," she said breathlessly as she watched him and wondered how the few months could have made so much difference to her and so little to him. The same brown tweed coat, old but shapely, the pullover underneath he had worn last year. All familiar. He looked at her teasingly with his brown, almost monkey-like eyes and grumbled: "Well, if you will come in and bring snow with you, upsetting me and my house. . . . Still now you are here you'd better come and sit down."

He pulled out his chair for her. She nestled into it and kicking off her shoes warmed her toes by the fire. He stood, leaning against the mantelpiece, looking down at her and sucking at his pipe.

"That red woolly thing suits you," he said ruminatingly. "But you're thinner, my angel. Not surprising really when you consider what's happened to you. Do you remember the last time you came here you made some very immodest suggestions? Made from the profound depths of your schoolgirl wisdom—I have no doubt. Remember?"

She nodded, looking into the fire.

"Yes, I haven't forgotten."

"And why, may I ask, did you have to come this time, or is that too bold a question? But now that you're grown up I feel I can ask it."

She understood his half serious, half teasing manner and loved him for it.

"Do you think I've really grown up?"

"Yes, you have," he nodded, looking at her brown head, now so well groomed and neat, and the serious set of her lips—still soft and liable to curl into laughter, but at the moment gravely set over her teeth.

"Without knowing . . . anything?"

"Yes, my dear. I know the facts—the rest I can guess."

"It's all a dream—now," she answered very quietly.

"Oh!" He moved slightly. "But dreams sometimes leave a lasting impression."

"Yes—they're lovely when they're there. Afterwards . . . well, it's nice to come back to the real world—sometimes."

"You feel that?"

"Yes."

A cinder fell and she leaned forward and picked it up with the tongs.

"What I really want to know," she said meditatively, "is—if it's really true—Cicely heard from Enid and she says she's going to America for good and wants you to divorce her."

"Yes—it's true—she wrote to me this morning."

"Are you going to?"

He pulled at his pipe.

"Yes—I think she honestly would be happier without

me. We tried, you know, to patch up peace. I did try. Anne, I shall sell all I can to raise the money."

"Yes, I know."

"What are your plans?"

"Mine? Well—I wondered if it would be a good idea if I stayed down here with mother for a little. I want the country—Ernest—terribly—all these months have been so—unreal."

"Of course you want the country. It's the only thing for you—now."

"But, you see," she went on, still gazing into the fire, "I can't stay here unless we—you and I—can be friends. No, don't stop me—I must tell you. I realise now that you must have been awfully scared of me once—and my immodest suggestions, as you put it, and I was furious when I heard Enid had come back to live here—my virginal pride was hurt—awfully, and I thought the bitterest things about you. Now I can laugh at myself. I was a poor mutt. But I just want to tell you that you needn't be afraid of me any more—in other words I shan't do it again, I really won't."

His eyes were half shut—he continued to smoke.

"My sweet thing!—don't please explain. Explanations are not necessary. Always remember that. The truth is I've never been afraid of you—only of myself. You've learnt in these last few months what it takes some people a lifetime to find out—and you've arrived at a true valuation."

"Valuation? What of?"

"Everything—yourself—people—money—happiness—love——"

"P'raps. But Ernest dear, don't you think you've got to take what comes along and make the best of it?"

"That depends, darling. If you're selective and know what you want—it's sometimes better to wait—isn't it?"

She peered into the fire.

"Yes, but suppose you wait too long? Suppose the thing you want isn't possible and never has been—what then?"

"You keep your self-respect, a certain strength, a purpose. Three very good objects to possess."

"Yes—then you think I did wrong to marry?"

"No—you were right at the time you did it and you'd have made a good show of it and kept the flag flying, I'm convinced. But Anne dear, if you look back and think of what I said to you that day in the spring, you'll realise that I had to send you out on your voyage—shall we say of discovery—because I was so afraid I should just make a mess of your life. I love you, darling, I always have. I'm too old for you, I'm difficult and tiresome and say mad things to hurt, but I do love you. I've missed you so much that I just had to cling on to the cottage. It anchored my memories of you. You were a naughty, wayward, adorable child, now you're a fine woman."

"Ernest, darling—am I as fat as that?"

Laughing at him, crying because of him, she sat with her head bent.

"Well—fine but not buxom. That better?"

"A bit."

"But there's one thing. We won't see much of each other till I'm free. You know, village gossips and things, so you'd better go away now. Quick—march."

She sat motionless and said: "How long will it take?"

"What a shameless hussy it is. Well, the wheel of

the law grinds very slowly, as you know. But, my dear," he raised her head with his fingers, "I mean it. Don't make it hard for me."

"No." She sprang out of her chair and, balancing herself on one foot, slipped a shoe on. "I won't dally. I love you lots, too. I'll go and Mother will ask you to come to our Christmas dinner—and we shall have plenty of chaperones—including Cicely."

"Cicely too?"

"Yes, are you surprised?"

"Well—a little."

Anne stood still and looked at him.

"Then Enid did gossip a bit!"

"Only to me, I think. Give her her dues."

"Poor Cicely."

"Why poor?"

"She's had a hard knock. I don't quite know what's happened, but she came down last night looking all in. — She's come back to Jim."

"Wise woman."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it. But you'll have a difficult time with her, my dear. You must find her some fresh interests. If she's got time to allow her mind to dwell on—well on a particular human being, she'll become quite warped. You know, the more inaccessible a person is, the more one's true idea of him becomes blurred. She'll think of him as the one man in all the world possessing the qualities she most likes and admires, unless her pride induces her to hate him."

"Must it be one or the other?"

"To a woman like Cicely—yes—I should say so—unless she has some supreme, practical diversion."

"A home—or a child?"

"Both would be perfect."

"What a lot you know about women—Ernest. I never thought——"

"No—dear—I don't. I wish I did."

She glanced tentatively at him. "Do you imagine I felt like that about you?"

"Probably," he answered cheerfully. "A natural revulsion of feeling. But I flatter myself you don't hate me now."

Suddenly Anne was shy. "Oh, well, I'd better go." She looked back at him from the casement, her hand on the handle.

"Do you know—the Grange is for sale—would that be a good thing for Cicely?"

"Absolutely splendid. She'd be so busy being the perfect landowner and president of most societies—she'd forget other people in time. But——"

"Yes?"

"I do think a child is also essential."

"Yes—so do I—but Jim——"

"Does he know about the other man?"

"I don't know, Cicely doesn't either, and I'm not sure if Jim himself is certain if he knows or not."

"That sounds better to me. Jim's a good man and I think you can trust him to take the lead now. Push off, there's a lamb."

"*Au revoir*—my sweet."

"So long, darling."